

## Introduction

Zoltán Gendler Szabó ed., *Semantics vs. Pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

According to the semiotic trichotomy proposed by Charles Morris in 1938, *syntax* is the study of “the formal relation of signs to one another”, *semantics* is the study of “the relations of signs to objects to which the signs are applicable”, and *pragmatics* is the study of “the relation of signs to interpreters”.<sup>1</sup> Even today, this is roughly the way most philosophers and linguists conceive of the fundamental divisions within the domain of theoretical linguistics.<sup>2</sup> But there are dissenters: those who believe that the task of semantics does not extend beyond providing adequate translation-manuals cannot accept this distinction between syntax and semantics, and those who subscribe to the view that the meaning of a linguistic expression is identical to its use must reject the proposed distinction between semantics and pragmatics.

Drawing the line between semantics and pragmatics is particularly problematic. Even if we reject the most radical versions of the use theory of meaning,<sup>3</sup> the question remains how the relation between linguistic expressions and the world can be studied in isolation from the way these expressions are employed in speech and writing. After all, a

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Morris, *Foundations of a Theory of Signs*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938, p. 6. (Morris uses the now unusual term ‘syntactics’ for what has come to be called ‘syntax’.)

<sup>2</sup> Of course, the definitions are supposed to be restricted to *linguistic* signs. Even so, Morris’s definitions of syntax and pragmatics are rather broad: the former includes both phonology and morphology, the latter pretty much everything that is covered these days by psycho- and socio-linguistics.

<sup>3</sup> Radical versions of the use theory are hopeless. The meaning of an expression cannot be identified with its *actual* use (for there are many meaningful complex expressions which have never been used) or its *potential* use (for expressions could be used in ways that are incompatible with their actual meanings). Any sensible version of the use theory must identify meaning with certain *norms* of usage – the question is whether there is a non-circular way to specify *which* ones.

large part of what semantics is supposed to explain are judgments regarding the truth or falsity of certain sentences in certain actual or merely imagined circumstances – and these are hard to separate from judgments about the appropriateness or inappropriateness of certain uses of those sentences. For example, since the sentence ‘I tried to drink my coffee’ is decidedly inappropriate in describing a perfectly usual breakfast in which I easily downed two cups, the temptation is strong to say that the sentence cannot be true in that sort of situation, which in turn must be reflected somehow in the very meaning of the word ‘try’.

Many have felt that such a temptation must be resisted, but the first systematic attempt to say why is due to Paul Grice. He recognized that what we need is

a theory which will enable one to distinguish between the case in which an utterance is inappropriate because it is false or fails to be true, or more generally fails to correspond with the world in some favored way, and the case in which it is inappropriate for reasons of a different kind.<sup>4</sup>

The significance of such a theory goes well beyond linguistics or even philosophy of language. Contextualists about knowledge insist that ascriptions of knowledge vary in their truth-conditions depending on the contextual standard available at the time of the ascription; non-cognitivists believe that the expressive character of utterances of moral sentences guarantee that they cannot be true or false; nominalists attempt sophisticated explanations of how serious utterances of apparently true mathematical sentences can fail

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Grice, ‘Prolegomena’ in: *Studies in the Way of Words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 4. The idea that we need to catalogue carefully the different ways in which utterances can be inappropriate goes back to J. L. Austin; cf. *How to Do Things with Words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962, esp. Lectures III and IV. Austin, however, was deeply suspicious of the possibility of a fully systematic theory about matters of language.

to be true. These proposals can only be properly evaluated if we have a principled and empirically well-grounded way to make distinctions among inappropriate utterances.

Grice does outline such a theory about linguistic communication but, strikingly, fails to be fully explicit about just how the theory is supposed to accomplish the task it is designed to achieve. Nonetheless, most commentators have assumed that the distinction between *what is said* and *what is implicated* is doing the trick. The distinction is made within what Grice called “the total signification of an utterance,” which he equates with *what is meant* by the speaker.<sup>5</sup> A successful utterance might be inappropriate because the speaker *said* something false – or because he *implicated* something false. Thus, an utterance of ‘I tried to drink my coffee’ in describing a perfectly usual breakfast is true but inappropriate because the speaker falsely implicated that he encountered some difficulty in imbibing. Semantics is concerned with what is said, pragmatics with what is implicated, and utterance interpretation – the process whereby the addressee ascertains what the speaker meant – has typically both a semantic and a pragmatic component. Call the view that draws the line between semantics and pragmatics this way the *traditional view*.

The traditional view is Gricean in its origin and motivation, but there are reasons to doubt that Grice himself held such a view. The least important reason is that he doesn’t actually use the terms ‘semantics’ and ‘pragmatics.’ More significant is his commitment that there are components of the total signification of an utterance that are contributed by

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Grice, ‘Further Notes on Logic and Conversation’ and ‘Utterer’s Meaning, Sentence Meaning, and Word Meaning’, in: *op.cit.* p. 41 and 118. The term is thus somewhat misleading: there is information to be extracted from an utterance that is not part of its total signification. When you hear me utter the words ‘We have a nice day today’, you can be quite certain that I am alive and awake, that I speak English, and if you are good at that sort of thing, you can even determine that I am not a native speaker. None of these were said or implicated in Grice’s sense; I conveyed them without meaning to do so.

the conventional meanings of linguistic expressions but which nonetheless fail to belong to what is said. According to Grice, when the speaker combines two clauses with the words ‘but’ or ‘therefore’, instead of the word ‘and’, his choice does not affect what he said. Rather, he manages to conventionally implicate something – some sort of contrast in the case of ‘but’, or entailment in the case of ‘therefore’. Since conventional implicature *is* a matter of linguistic meaning, it would be odd to say that Grice intended to exclude it from the scope of semantics. Finally, and even more significantly, the force of an utterance (the feature that distinguishes the case where ‘Could you close the window?’ is uttered as a question from the case where it is uttered as a request) is hard to locate in this picture. It cannot be part of what is said (it is part of *how* what is said is said) and it doesn’t seem to be part of what is implicated (it isn’t merely suggested or intimated). Nonetheless, force is part of what the speaker meant and it would be most unfair to assume that Grice intended to exclude it both from semantics and pragmatics.<sup>6</sup>

Whether or not Grice adopted it, the traditional view is still popular among philosophers. (Linguists tend to be more critical or at least more guarded in their approval.) Nonetheless, it may well be that some of the simplicity and intuitive appeal comes from a lack of clarity about what the view is actually committed to. Let me elaborate.

Consider a case when you are looking for the exit and in order to help you out I sincerely utter ‘It’s on the left’. There are two ways to think about what I meant when I made my utterance. On the one hand, I certainly meant to bring about a certain effect – that you turn left and walk to the exit – and this was the reason I made the utterance. If

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<sup>6</sup> Indeed, when he characterizes his wider program, he tends to restrict the scope of the distinction between what is said and what is implicated to “a large class of utterances” (*op.cit.*, p. 41) or “remarks” (*op. cit.*, 118), by which he presumably means assertions.

you don't trust me and don't turn, there is a clear sense in which my utterance failed. But there is also another sense in which all I meant was to tell you that the exit is on the left, and in this I most likely succeeded even if I fail to get you to turn. Following Austin, we should distinguish between the *perlocutionary* and *illocutionary* acts involved in my utterance, and corresponding to these what I meant *by* the utterance (i.e. that you turn left and walk to the exit) and what I meant *in* making it (i.e. that the exit is on the left). Which one should we regard as the Gricean notion of what is meant, with respect to which the semantics/pragmatics distinction is to be drawn? If the aim of utterance interpretation is to make sense of the speaker's action in relation to the audience, we need to know what he meant by the utterance; if the aim is to state what the speaker did, irrespective of the addressee's reaction, we need to know what he meant in making it.<sup>7</sup>

Consider now the question of what I said when I uttered the sentence 'It's on the left' in the story described above. Again, there seem to be two ways to approach the question: their difference can be brought out by asking whether I said *what* it is that is on the left. In one sense I did not – I didn't have to, since in the context of my utterance it was clear that I am talking about the exit. In another sense I certainly did – I asserted that the exit is on the left. Again following Austin, we might want to distinguish between the *locutionary* act of saying (i.e. uttering certain meaningful words) from the *illocutionary*

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<sup>7</sup> This might make a big difference in the following sort of case, discussed by John Searle. An American soldier in the Second World War wishes to convince the Italians who have captured him that he is a German officer by uttering the only German sentence he knows: 'Kennst du das Land wo die Zitronen blühen?' Intuitively, Searle insists, the American did not mean that he was a German soldier. The moral for Searle is that in order for a speaker to mean something, he must intend that his primary intention to convey something be recognized *in virtue of the addressee's knowledge of the conventional meaning of the words he employed*; cf. John Searle, *Speech Acts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965, pp. 49 – 50. But this revision has drastic consequences: it forecloses to possibility of a non-circular explanation of the emergence of conventional meaning from speaker meaning. One thing Grice *could* have responded to Searle is that although the soldier did not mean anything *in* making the utterance, he did mean something *by* making it and speaker meaning is that matter of the latter, not the former. But, as a matter of fact, he said something else instead; cf. Paul Grice, 'Utterer's Meaning and Intentions' in: *op. cit.* pp. 100 – 104.

act of saying (i.e. performing a speech act in uttering those words). Corresponding to these two acts there are two notions of what is said – one that is neutral about what is said to be on the left in our case, and another that isn't. Which one is supposed to mark the scope of semantics? If semantics is supposed to be confined to what we know about linguistic expressions solely in virtue of being competent speakers of the language to which those expressions belong, its subject matter is what is said in the locutionary sense; if it is supposed to be fully explicit about how linguistic expressions relate to the world it deals with, its subject matter is what is said in the illocutionary sense.<sup>8</sup>

Drawing the distinctions between the locutionary and illocutionary senses of saying and between the illocutionary and perlocutionary senses of meaning may help to clarify the traditional view, but it is unlikely to preserve its intuitive appeal. Even if we take the ambiguities into account and we say that the semantics/pragmatics distinction is, for example, the distinction between what is said (illocutionary sense – in the cases traditionally focused upon: what is asserted) and what is meant (illocutionary sense – in the cases traditionally focused upon: what is communicated), the pretense of terminological innocence is gone. Asserting and communicating are not the notions of

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<sup>8</sup> In discussing an utterance of 'He is in the grip of vice', Grice says that in order to fully specify what the speaker said we need to know *who* is said to be unable to rid himself of a bad character trait; cf. Paul Grice 'Logic and Conversation' in: *op. cit.* p. 25. He would probably make an analogous commitment in the case of an utterance of 'It's on the left'. This probably settles that he did not construe 'what is said' along locutionary lines. It does not, however, settle whether he understood it in the illocutionary sense, or attached to it some vague intermediate sense. I am inclined to think that the latter is the case. Instead of asking whether I said *what* it is that is on the left, we might ask whether I said *which direction* the exit is. My utterance settles that question only if it is clear how the addressee is oriented in space. If Grice used 'what is said' in the illocutionary sense (in the sense of 'what is asserted') he would have to say that in order to know what is said by the speaker of an utterance of 'It's on the left' one must know the spatial orientation of the addressee. I doubt that Grice would have allowed this: he was firmly committed to the claim that what is said by the speaker of an utterance is tightly correlated with "the elements of [the sentence], their order, and their syntactic character"; cf. Paul Grice, 'Utterer's Meaning and Intentions' in: *op. cit.* p. 87. If so, the only way to insist that the spatial orientation of the addressee is part of what is said would be to postulate some unpronounced element in the sentence that identifies it. Given Grice's general methodology, I think it unlikely that he would have been ready to do this. For further discussion of Grice's notion of 'what is said', see Kent Bach, 'You Don't Say' *Synthese* 128(2001): 15 – 44.

our “folk-theory” about talking – they are semi-technical terms waiting for further elaboration. Drawing the semantics/pragmatics boundary is not a matter of assigning a new label to a distinction we all make anyway in our ordinary thinking.<sup>9</sup>

Once we see beyond the blanket terms ‘what is said’ and ‘what is meant’ it becomes obvious that there are a number of important distinctions that *could* be called the semantics/pragmatics divide. The best way to advance conceptual clarity and explanatory progress is perhaps not to focus on one or another of these distinctions prematurely, but to catalogue them so we can discuss their relations to one another. Only after we have explored the bordering region of semantics and pragmatics can we figure out which one of these (if any) divides the subject matter in a way that is both in harmony with current usage and makes best theoretical sense. Here are six reasonably clear theoretical divisions to be considered; there are probably more. (I restrict attention here to what is conveyed – intentionally or not – in assertions).

- (a) *Competence*: Typically, some but not all of what the speaker conveys could be grasped by any competent speaker without special knowledge.
- (b) *Encoding*: Typically, some but not all of what the speaker conveys is encoded in the expression uttered.
- (c) *Compositionality*: Typically, some but not all of what the speaker conveys is compositionally determined (by the syntax and the lexicon).
- (d) *Rules*: Typically, some but not all of what the speaker conveys can be ascertained by following rules, as opposed to elaborate cognitive strategies.

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<sup>9</sup> The ways we *actually* use expressions like ‘what she said’ or ‘what she meant’ seem to be rather undisciplined. Standards of what counts as an adequate report of what a speaker said on an occasion (let alone what she meant) are subject to complicated and *prima facie* haphazard contextual changes; cf. Herman Cappelen and Ernest Lepore, ‘On an alleged connection between indirect quotation and semantic theory.’ *Mind and Language* 12(1997): 278 – 296.

(e) *Truth-conditionality*: Typically, some but not all of what the speaker conveys is truth-conditionally relevant.

(f) *Intention-independence*: Typically, some but not all of what the speaker conveys is independent of the speaker's specific intentions to talk about this or that.

It is not obvious that any two of these divisions coincide. Connotations (e.g. that 'dude' is informal and that 'Know you not the cause?' is archaic) are linguistically encoded, but knowledge of them is arguably not required for competence, so (a) and (b) come apart. We follow rules for interpreting intonation patterns but not all these rules are determined by the syntax and the lexicon, so (c) and (d) come apart. Disambiguation is clearly truth-conditionally relevant but it cannot be done without taking into account the intentions of the speaker, so (e) and (f) come apart. And so on – as far as I can tell – for any one of the remaining twelve pairs.

Where a piece of information conveyed in making an assertive utterance lies relative to these six distinctions is often hard to know. Is knowledge that 'John is a bachelor' entails 'John is unmarried' part of our linguistic competence or part of what we know about the world, i.e. knowledge of the nature of the properties of being a bachelor and being unmarried?<sup>10</sup> Is it linguistically encoded in 'Jack hates Jack' that in an utterance of such a sentence the names are presumed to refer to different people?<sup>11</sup> Is what someone asserts in uttering 'This leaf is green' compositionally determined, given that the truth of the assertion appears to depend on whether the speaker is sorting leaves

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<sup>10</sup> The standard answer is 'yes', but Fodor has long argued that this is wrong; cf. e.g. Jerry Fodor, *Concepts: Where Cognitive Science Went Wrong*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.

<sup>11</sup> Given that Chomsky's Principle A requires non-coindexing of the two names, the standard answer is 'yes'. For a dissent, see Stephen Levinson, *Presumptive Meanings*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000.

for decoration or for the purposes of biological classification?<sup>12</sup> Is there a rule for assigning reference to occurrences of demonstratives, or is saying that they refer to what is being demonstrated (even if in fact there is no observable demonstration!) just a thinly veiled confession that there is *no* rule we could *follow*?<sup>13</sup> Is focus ever truth-conditionally irrelevant, given that ‘John only introduced Bill to *Sue*’ can be true even if ‘John only introduced *Bill* to *Sue*’ is false?<sup>14</sup> Is the reference of ‘I’ fixed independently of the specific intentions of the speaker, even in an utterance of a condemned prisoner of ‘I am traditionally allowed to order whatever I want for my last meal’?<sup>15</sup>

All these questions lie at the border of semantics and pragmatics – in fact, they are often described as debates concerning the question whether a certain linguistic phenomenon is semantic or pragmatic in character. The fact that we do not have a robust and widely agreed upon explicit conception of what that distinction really amounts to does not make the debates futile: perhaps the participants share a tacit and fairly rich underlying conception of the distinction, a conception that has yet to be adequately articulated. Or, if this optimistic assumption proves illusory, perhaps there are a *few* such conceptions at play, some in some debates, and others in others. Either way, work needs

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<sup>12</sup> For an argument against compositionality using this example cf. Charles Travis, ‘On Constraints of Generality’ in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*. New Series **44**(1994): 165 – 88. London: Aristotelian Society Publications. For a reply cf. Zoltán Gendler Szabó, ‘Adjectives in Context’ in: I. Kenesei and R. M. Harnish eds., *Perspectives on Semantics, Pragmatics, and Discourse*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2001, pp. 119 – 146.

<sup>13</sup> The standard answer is, of course, that there is a rule we follow in fixing the referent of a demonstrative. For a negative view, see Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986.

<sup>14</sup> Until Mats Rooth’s dissertation (*Association with Focus*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts, 1985) it was widely believed that focus is truth-conditionally inert (at least in English).

<sup>15</sup> Examples like this are discussed in detail in Geoffery Nunberg, ‘Indexicality and Deixis’ *Linguistics and Philosophy* **16**(1993): 1- 43. The orthodox view that in any context of its utterance ‘I’ rigidly refers to the speaker comes from David Kaplan, *Demonstratives: An Essay on the Semantics, Logic, Metaphysics, and Epistemology of Demonstratives and Other Indexicals*. In J. Almog, J. In J. Almog, J. Perry and H. Wettstein eds., *Themes from Kaplan*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, pp. 481 – 563.

to be done to bring the tacit conception(s) to the fore. The central aim of this volume is to contribute to a new debate about how this could be done.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> For other recent detailed discussions of different conceptions of the semantics/pragmatics distinction, see Chapter 1 of Stephen Levinson, *Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, K. Turner (ed.) *The Semantics/Pragmatics Interface from Different Points of View*. Oxford: Elsevier Science, 1999, and Zoltán Gendler Szabó, 'The Distinction between Semantics and Pragmatics', in: E. Lepore and B. Smith eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming.