

Introduction to Semantics

6. The scope and limits of formal semantics

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- Remember that the main idea of formal semantics is to provide a compositional semantics that assigns meanings to expression types.
- This isn't necessarily in conflict with the fact that propositional content sometimes depends on context.
- Take an indexical expression like 'I', as in 'I'm hungry', or 'I'm a philosopher'.
- As a word *type*, this expression doesn't receive a fixed meaning, independent of the context of utterance.
- After all, it always receives an interpretation at least depending on who the speaker is.
- Thus the context-invariant meaning of the word type could be something like a function from utterance contexts (with a designated speaker) to extensions.

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Linguistic Understanding

phonetics/orthographies \Rightarrow syntax \Rightarrow semantics \Rightarrow pragmatics

- So, the idea is that we begin with identifying the words involved,
 - ... then identify the structural properties of the sentence (analysis of logical form),
 - ... then analyse the meaning of this syntactic item (semantic interpretation),
 - ... and finally work out what the speaker of this sentence wanted to convey by uttering a sentence with this meaning on that particular occasion.

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- **Already our story about 'I' distorts the picture a little.**
- We don't retrieve the semantic interpretation just from the syntax alone, but need a bit of information from the context.
- However, that we need such information is indicated by the syntax (viz. the use of the first-person pronoun).
- Also which information we need from the context is pretty constrained: we only need to look at something that is to some extent delivered together with the utterance, namely it's speaker.

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- But here are some examples of a more problematic nature:

- ① Paracetamol is better [than aspirin]
- ② You won't die [from that scratch]
- ③ I've eaten [recently]
- ④ It's raining [where the speaker is]
- ⑤ Everybody [who came to the party] had a great time
- ⑥ Smith weighs 120 pounds [weighed before breakfast and undressed]
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- Also it is not in all cases clear what part of the context delivers the additional information.
- As we said, perhaps as long as the information that is provided by the context is openly accessible, it perhaps doesn't yet contradict the idea of semantics as the study of literal meaning that is somehow stable and determined by linguistic conventions.
- However, if the information from the context is something rather like the intentions of the speaker, that you'd need to know in order to know what is said, this might be a too radical departure from the general idea of formal semantics.

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- According to it, the level of semantic interpretation that formal semantics wants to study (what we called the level of literal meaning), can't be studied in isolation from pragmatics.
 - ① Linguistic decoding \Rightarrow incomplete logical form
 - ② Pragmatic inference (1) \Rightarrow what is said/stated (the “literal meaning”)
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- It should be noted though that if dual pragmatics poses a problem for formal semantics, then only for the aim to be able to give a full formal semantic treatment of the level of literal meaning.
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