

Semantics in EFL Classroom: A Brief Review

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Abstract: *Knowing a language means to know how to produce and understand sentences with particular meanings. Semantics is the study of how languages organize and express meanings. It is the branch of linguistics that deals with the meaning of words, phrases and sentences. Semantics is concerned with objective or general meaning and avoids trying to account for subjective or local meaning. This paper tries to critically evaluate what the semantics is; what are its major types; what it studies; what are its related fields; how semantic features analyze the meaning of meanings; How semantic roles classify the arguments of natural language predicates into a closed set of participant types; and how this subfield of linguistics can be applied in EFL classroom for better teaching learning process.*

Keywords: *Linguistics, Semantics, EFL, Semantic Roles, Semantic features*

I. Introduction

Linguistic semantics is the conventional meaning conveyed by the use of words, phrases and sentences of a language; lexical semantics is concerned with the meanings of morphemes and words; and phrasal or sentential semantics with phrases and sentences. When we investigate the meaning of words in a language, we are normally interested in characterizing the **conceptual** meaning and less concerned with the **associative** meaning of the words. Conceptual meaning covers those basic, essential components of meaning that are conveyed by the literal use of a word. Some of the basic components of a word like needle in English might include 'thin, sharp, steel instrument'. These components would be part of the conceptual meaning of needle. However, different people might have different associations or connotations attached to a word like needle. They might associate it with 'pain', or 'illness', or 'blood', or 'drugs', or 'thread', or 'knitting', or 'hard to find', and these associations may differ from one person to the next. These types of associations are not treated as part of the word's conceptual meaning. In a similar way, some people may associate the expression low-calorie, when used to describe a product, with 'healthy', but this is not part of the basic conceptual meaning of the expression (i.e. 'producing a small amount of heat or energy'). Poets, novelists, advertisers and lovers may be very interested in using words in such a way that certain associative meanings are evoked and literary critics often write about this aspect of language use (Hurford & Brendan, 1983; Frawley, 1992; Lyons, 1995; Saeed, 1997; Kreidler, 1998; Yule, 2006).

II. Conceptualizing Semantics

Derivation of a Greek word *sēmantikós*, semantics is the study of meaning. It focuses on the relation between signifiers, like words, phrases, signs, and symbols, and what they stand for, their denotation. Linguistic semantics is the study of meaning that is used for understanding human expression through language. The word semantics itself denotes a range of ideas - from the popular to the highly technical. It is often used in ordinary language for denoting a problem of understanding that comes down to word selection or connotation. This problem of understanding has been the subject of many formal enquiries, over a long period of time, most notably in the field of formal semantics. In linguistics, it is the study of interpretation of signs or symbols used in agents or communities within particular circumstances and contexts. Within this view, sounds, facial expressions, body language, and proxemics have semantic (meaningful) content, and each comprises several branches of study. In written language, things like paragraph structure and punctuation bear semantic content; other forms of language bear other semantic content (Otto, Rudolf & Charles, 1955; Hurford & Brendan, 1983; Frawley, 1992; Lyons, 1995; Saeed, 1997; Kreidler, 1998; Yule, 2006).

The history of semantics can be dated back to the writings of Plato and Aristotle. Later, in twentieth century it reflects in the works of philosophers and logicians like Charles Peirce (1839–1914), Rudolf Carnap (1891–1970) and Alfred Tarski (1902–83), particularly under the heading of semiotics and the 'philosophy of language'. From its inception in the 1880's through the 1950's, semantics dealt practically exclusively with word meaning. Since the 1960's, it has focused on sentence meaning. Recently, there have been serious indications of an increased interest to paragraph meaning and even discourse meaning. During behaviourists approach the semantics was ignored saying that it was incapable of elucidation in behavioural terms (restricting the study of

meaning to only observable and measurable behaviour). But semantics received proper attention since 1960's when the structural semantics got more space into linguistics (Otto, Rudolf & Charles, 1955; Hurford & Brendan, 1983; Frawley, 1992; Lyons, 1995; Saeed, 1997; Kreidler, 1998; Yule, 2006; Crystal, 2008).

The formal study of semantics intersects with many other fields of inquiry, including lexicology, syntax, pragmatics, etymology and others, although semantics is a well-defined field in its own right, often with synthetic properties. In philosophy of language, semantics and reference are closely connected. Further related fields include philology, communication, and semiotics. The formal study of semantics is therefore complex (Alen, 2000). Semantics contrasts with syntax, the study of the combinatorics of units of a language (without reference to their meaning), and pragmatics, the study of the relationships between the symbols of a language, their meaning, and the users of the language (Philip & Wesley, 1989). In linguistics, semantics is the subfield that is devoted to the study of meaning, as inherent at the levels of words, phrases, sentences, and larger units of discourse (termed texts). The basic area of study is the meaning of signs, and the study of relations between different linguistic units and compounds: homonymy, synonymy, antonymy, hypernymy, hyponymy, meronymy, metonymy, holonymy, paronyms. A key concern is how meaning attaches to larger chunks of text, possibly as a result of the composition from smaller units of meaning. Traditionally, semantics has included the study of sense and denotative reference, truth conditions, argument structure, thematic roles, discourse analysis, and the linkage of all of these to syntax (Otto, Rudolf & Charles, 1955; Hurford & Brendan, 1983; Frawley, 1992; Lyons, 1995; Saeed, 1997; Kreidler, 1998; Yule, 2006; Crystal, 2008).

III. Semantic Roles

A term used in semantics to refer to the semantic relations that link a predicate to its arguments in the description of a situation. Thus in the sentence Roger milked the cow the entities are related by the action described by the verb: Roger as the volitional instigator is often termed the agent; and the cow as the affected entity, the patient. There is no general agreement on the number of participant roles available to speakers of languages, but others include: instrument, the means by which an action is performed or something comes about; theme, the entity which is moved by an action, or whose location is described; experiencer, the entity which is aware of the action described by the predicate but which is not in control; beneficiary, the entity for whose benefit the action was performed; location (locative), the place in which something is situated or takes place; goal, the entity or place towards which something moves; and source, the entity or place from which something moves. It has been suggested that these roles may be subsumed into two main types: the **macro-roles** of actor and undergoer, or, in an alternative terminology, the **proto-roles** of agent and patient. These roles have been important in the establishment of semantic classes of verbs. Other names for these roles include **deep semantic cases**, **functional roles**, **participant roles**, and, especially in Chomskyan linguistics, **thematic** (or **theta**, θ) roles (Hurford & Brendan, 1983; Frawley, 1992; Lyons, 1995; Saeed, 1997; Kreidler, 1998; Yule, 2006; Crystal, 2008).

Yule (2006) suggests that Instead of thinking of words as 'containers' of meaning, we can look at the 'roles' they fulfill within the situation described by a sentence. If the situation is a simple event, as in The boy kicked the ball, then the verb describes an action (kick). The noun phrases in the sentence describe the roles of entities, such as people and things, involved in the action. We can identify a small number of **semantic roles** for these noun phrases.

3.1 Agent and Theme

In our example sentence, one role is taken by the noun phrase The boy as 'the entity that performs the action', technically known as the **agent**. Another role is taken by the ball as 'the entity that is involved in or affected by the action', which is called the **theme** (or sometimes the 'patient'). The theme can also be an entity (The ball) that is simply being described (i.e. not performing an action), as in The ball was red. Agents and themes are the most common semantic roles. Although agents are typically human (The boy), they can also be non-human entities that cause actions, as in noun phrases denoting a natural force (The wind), a machine (A car), or a creature (The dog), all of which affect the ball as theme.

The boy kicked the ball.

The wind blew the ball away.

A car ran over the ball.

The dog caught the ball.

The theme is typically non-human, but can be human (the boy), as in The dog chased the boy. In fact, the same physical entity can appear in two different semantic roles in a sentence, as in The boy cut himself. Here The boy is agent and himself is theme.

3.2 Instrument and Experiencer

If an agent uses another entity in order to perform an action, that other entity fills the role of **instrument**. In the sentences The boy cut the rope with an old razor and He drew the picture with a crayon, the noun phrases an old razor and a crayon are being used in the semantic role of instrument. When a noun phrase is used to designate an entity as the person who has a feeling, perception or state, it fills the semantic role of **experiencer**. If we see, know or enjoy something, we're not really performing an action (hence we are not agents). We are in the role of experiencer. In the sentence The boy feels sad, the experiencer (The boy) is the only semantic role. In the question, Did you hear that noise?, the experiencer is you and the theme is that noise.

3.3 Location, source and goal

A number of other semantic roles designate where an entity is in the description of an event; where an entity is (on the table, in the room) fills the role of **location**; where the entity moves from is the **source** (from Chicago) and where it moves to is the **goal** (to New Orleans), as in We drove from Chicago to New Orleans. When we talk about transferring money from savings to checking, the source is savings and the goal is checking.

All these semantic roles are illustrated in the following scenario. Note that a single entity (e.g. George) can appear in several different semantic roles.

1. Mary saw a fly on the wall.

Experiencer **Theme** **Location**

2. She borrowed a magazine from George.

Agent **Theme** **Source**

3. She squashed the bug with the magazine.

Agent **Theme** **Instrument**

4. She handed the magazine back to George.

Agent **Theme** **Goal**

IV. Semantic Features

In semantics, a minimal contrastive element of a word's meaning; in some approaches, called a semantic component. Girl, for example, might be analysed into such features as 'young', 'female' and 'human'. In child language acquisition, the semantic feature hypothesis (SFH) claims that the order of appearance of a child's lexical items is governed by the type and complexity of the semantic features they contain (Crystal, 2008).

One obvious way in which the study of basic conceptual meaning might be helpful in the study of language would be as a means of accounting for the 'oddness' we experience when we read sentences such as the following:

The hamburger ate the boy.

The table listens to the radio.

The horse is reading the newspaper.

We should first note that the oddness of these sentences does not derive from their syntactic structure. According to the basic syntactic rules for forming English sentences it is well-structured.

NP	V	NP
The hamburger	ate	the boy

This sentence is syntactically good, but semantically odd. Since the sentence the boy ate the hamburger is perfectly acceptable, we may be able to identify the source of the problem. The components of the conceptual meaning of the noun hamburger must be significantly different from those of the noun boy, thereby preventing one, and not the other, from being used as the subject of the verb ate. The kind of noun that can be the subject of the verb ate must denote an entity that is capable of 'eating'. The noun hamburger does not have this property and the noun boy does.

We can make this observation more generally applicable by trying to determine the crucial element or feature of meaning that any noun must have in order to be used as the subject of the verb ate. Such an element may be as general as 'animate being'. We can then use this idea to describe part of the meaning of words as having either plus (+) or minus (-) that particular feature. So, the feature that the noun boy has is '+animate' (=

denotes an animate being) and the feature that the noun hamburger has is ‘-animate’ (= does not denote an animate being).

This simple example is an illustration of a procedure for analyzing meaning in terms of semantic features. Features such as ‘+animate, -animate’; ‘+human, -human’, ‘+female, -female’, for example, can be treated as the basic elements involved in differentiating the meaning of each word in a language from every other word. If we had to provide the crucial distinguishing features of the meanings of a set of English words such as table, horse, boy, man, girl, woman, we could begin with the following table:

	Table	horse	Boy	Man	girl	Woman
animate	-	+	+	+	+	+
human	-	-	+	+	+	+
female	-	-	-	-	+	+
adult	-	+	-	+	-	+

From a feature analysis like this, we can say that at least part of the meaning of the word girl in English involves the elements [+human, +female, -adult]. We can also characterize the feature that is crucially required in a noun in order for it to appear as the subject of a particular verb, supplementing the syntactic analysis with semantic features. The ----- is reading the newspaper.

N [+human]

This approach would give us the ability to predict which nouns make this sentence semantically odd. Some examples would be table, horse and hamburger, because none of them have the required feature [+human]. The approach just outlined is a start on analyzing the conceptual components of word meaning, but it is not without problems. For many words in a language it may not be as easy to come up with neat components of meaning. If we try to think of the components or features we would use to differentiate the nouns advice, threat and warning, for example, we may not be very successful. Part of the problem seems to be that the approach involves a view of words in a language as some sort of ‘containers’ that carry meaning components. There is clearly more to the meaning of words than these basic types of features (Yule, 2006).

V. Semantic Feature Analysis

The semantic feature analysis strategy can be used as a grid to help explore how sets of things are related to one another. By completing and analyzing the grid, students are able to see connections, make predictions and master important concepts. This strategy enhances comprehension and vocabulary skills.

5.1 Why to use?

- It illustrates how words are both similar and different and emphasizes the uniqueness of each word.
- It draws on students' prior knowledge and uses discussion to elicit information about word meanings.

5.2 When to Use?

- Before reading
- While reading
- After reading

5.3 How to Use?

- Individually
- With small group
- Whole class set-up.

5.4 Purpose

The purpose of this activity is to guide students in analyzing the meanings of specific words while integrating the meanings of new words into their vocabularies. When introducing this activity, we should use concrete categories that are within the experience of the students. Later, we can progress to less familiar or more abstract categories.

5.5 Procedure

- Select a category that relates to a topic to be studied or a reading selection. Select key words related to the topic.
- Make a chart with a topic heading at the top, key words listed down the side, and columns across the page. Head some of the columns with terms that represent features shared by some of the words.
Example:

Transportation in History				
	wheels	engine	Speed	cost
horses	-	-	-	-
bicycle	+	-	-	-
car	+	+	+	+
train	+	+	+	+
airplane	+	+	+	+

- i. Let the students place a plus or minus sign in each column across from each word, depending on whether or not the word has the feature heading the column. A question mark may be used if the student does not know.
- ii. Have the students discuss each word, tell why they chose a plus or minus, and explain how the word is similar to or different from the other words on the list.
- iii. Provide the planned lesson (e.g., lecture, reading, video).
- iv. Based on the information in the lesson, have the students change the signs in the matrix or fill in those that have question marks or were left blank.
- v. Guide a discussion about the relationship between the words and features. During the discussion, use a class chart shown on an overhead projector or drawn on the board and fill in the signs that have attained group consensus.

5.6 Optional Steps

The following steps may be included after Steps 3 or 7:

- i. Have the students add words to the list that fit the category.
- ii. Have the students add shared features in the empty columns.
- iii. Have the students complete the matrix with pluses and minuses.

5.7 Modification

When students become familiar with this activity, they may use a 10-point scale, rather than pluses or minuses, to indicate the degree of relationship between words and features (Johnson & Pearson, 1984).

VI. Conclusion

Unlike syntax, morphology and phonology, semantics is highly neglected and unexplored area time to time. The reason behind it was that the discipline sometime widely accepted by the contemporary scholars and sometimes it was highly rejected too. Now a day, semantics has got its revitalization. There is a great possibility to explore this area and to make it more interesting. However, more researches are needed to explore this vast discipline which may certainly be useful for EFL classroom.

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