The Definition of Semantics

Semantics is the study of meaning communicated through language. Unfortunately, ‘meaning’ covers a variety of aspects of language, and there is no very general agreement either about what meaning is or about the way in which it should be described. Therefore, a more specific term is really important here, such as the study of linguistic meaning is more often used for the sake of analytical convenience. It is then important to make clear limits that semantics concern to the nature of meaning only.

The term semantics is a recent addition to the English language. It was first introduced in the end of 19th century. The term semantics in English was adopted from French term, ‘semantique’. Although there is one occurrence of semantick in the phrase of semantick philosophy to mean ‘divinition’ in the seventeenth century, semantics does not occur until it was introduced to the American Philological Association in 1894 entitled ‘Reflected Meaning: a point in Semantics’.
Coseriu and Geckeler (1981: 8) said that the term semantics was firstly introduced by French scholar M. Breal in 1883. In the same page Coseriu and Geckeler said that there are at least three terms relate to the semantics; (i) linguistic semantics, (ii) the semantics of logicians, (iii) general semantics.

Other names that have been used in semantics were semasiology, semology, semiotics, sememics, and semics. Though scholars have often used some of these terms to suit their own interest and orientation, and in both wider and narrower senses than the term semantics we know today.

The term semantics was not that simply to refer to meaning but it is development. Such a concept of semantics has been even use in until the 20th century as can be evident from ‘Learner’s dictionary of Current English’, which defines semantics ‘branch of philology concern with changes of the meaning of words’. In other words, the dictionary defines semantics in term of historical semantics or the study of the historical changes of meaning. Furthermore, it is also interesting to find out that this dictionary has classified semantics and linguistics into plural nouns, but such similar words as economics, physics, etc as singular ones.

It was not until the publication of Breal’s booking English version Semantics: studies the science of meaning in 1900 that the term semantics was then treated as the ‘science’ of meaning and that is not primarily concern with the historical change of meaning (historical semantics). Since then, semantics has well been recognized as one of the linguistics studies and known as scientific study of meaning.
Some linguists have given the definition of semantics. Here are the definitions of semantics based on some linguists:

1. Semantics is the study of meaning communicated through language (Saeed, 1997: 3).
2. Semantics is a technical term used to refer to study of meaning (Palmer, 1976: 1).
3. Semantics is the branch of linguistics concern with studying the meaning of word and sentences (Hornby, 1972: 789).
4. Semantics is generally defined as the study of meaning (Lyons, 1977:1).
5. Semantics is the study of meaning. It concerned with what sentences and other linguistics objects express, not with the arrangement of their syntactic parts of their pronunciation (Katz, 1972: 1).
6. Semantics is the study of meaning in language. Based on the definition, we may be tempted to think that once we understand the semantics of a language, we completely understand that language. Meaning, however, involves more than just the semantics interpretation of an utterance (Hurford and Heasly, 1983: 1).

The Scope of Semantics

Although the study of meaning become more significant in the early twentieth century, many linguist study language without reference to meaning. two twentieth century American linguist have been particularly influential in shaping “the study of language without meaning”, i.e. Leonard Bloomfield and
Noam Chomsky. How Bloomfield places semantics in the study of language can be observed from Wierzbicka’s (1996) statements:

“Blommfield (unlike his great contemporary and cofounder of American linguistics, Edward Sapir) was afraid of meaning, and was eager to relegate the study of meaning to other disciplines such as sociology or psychology. The reason he was afraid of it that he wanted to establish linguistics a science that he thought that meaning couldn’t be studied with the same rigor as linguistics sounds and forms.” (Wierzbicka’s, 1996:3)

There are at least two mayor approach to the way in which meaning in language is studied, each of which is often very influential in determining which facts of meaning are relevant for semantics. The first is the linguistics approach. The students of language or linguist have been long interested in the way in which meaning in a language structured. There have been studies of the meanings of words and the semantic structure of sentences. Some of them also have distinguished between different types of meaning in the language. The second is philosophical approach. Philosophers have investigated the relation between linguistic expression, such as the words of language, and persons, things, and events in the world to which these words refer.

Although there may e different approaches to semantics, these three basic terms seem to be widely mentioned in each of these approaches, i.e. meaning, sense, and reference.

2.2.1 Meaning

According to new Webster’s Dictionary and Thesaurus (1992:619) meaning (n) is that which is intended or meant: adj. Expressive, conveying, emotion.

The meanings of meaning are varieties. It depends on the situation or the sentence. The noun ‘meaning’ and the verb ‘mean’, from which it is derived, are
used, like many other English words, in a white range of context and in several
distinguishable senses. For example, to take case of the verb:

Mary means well

One implies that Mary is well-intentioned, that she intends no harm.

The red flag means danger

In saying this, one would not normally be implying that the flag had plans to
endanger anyone; one would be pointing out that it is being used (in accordance
with previously established convention) to indicate that there is a danger in the
surrounding environment, such as, a crevasse on a snowy hillside or the imminent
use of explosive in a nearby quarry.

Smoke means fire

In both samples above one thing is said to be a sign, a red flag or a smoke, anyone
with the requisite knowledge can infer the existence of what it signifies, danger or
fire. But there is also an important difference between the samples. Whereas
smoke is natural sign of fire, casually connected with what it signifies, the red flag
is a conventional sign of danger: it is culturally established symbol.

From examples above we can see the variation meaning of meaning. C.K.
Ogden and I.A. Richards in their book ‘The Meaning of Meaning’ which is
quoted by Crystal (1987:100) introduces some meanings of meaning, they are
constructed in some sentences. Here they are;

John means to write. Means = intends

A green light means go. Means = indicates

Health means everything. Means = has important

His look was full of meaning. Means = special important
What is the meaning of life? Means = point, purpose

2.2.2 Sense and Reference

According to Hurford (1983) the notion of sense and reference are the central to the study of meaning. The idea of reference is relatively solid and easy to understand. The idea of sense is more elusive: it is a bit like electricity. Which we all know how to use (and even talk about) in various ways, without being sure what exactly it is.

In talking the sense we deal with relationship inside the language; in talking the reference we deal with relationship between language and the world (Hurford, 1983:25)

The same definition is also given by another linguist, named Palmer toward the term sense and reference. Here is his statement:

“Reference deals with the relationship between the linguistics elements, words, sentences, etc, and the nonlinguistic world of experience. Sense relates to the complex system of the relationship that holds between the linguistic elements themselves (mostly the words); it is concerned only with intra linguistic relations” (Palmer, 1976:30)

Phrase, like words, normally both have sense and can be used to refer. Thus the phrase ‘The man who is my father’ refers to a certain individual and has a certain sense which could be different from that of ‘The man who married my mother’, although both expression usually have the same reference.

Hurford (1983) gives a rule to make people understand what is actually meant with sense and reference. Here it is:

“Every expression that has meaning has sense, but not every expression has reference”.

Universitas Sumatera Utara
2.3 Lexical Relation

“Lexical relations are relationship of the meaning of a word to other words” (Bolinger, 1968:11). There are a number of different types of lexical relation. A particular lexeme (semantic words) may simultaneously in a number of these relations, so that it may be more accurate to think of the lexicon as a network, rather than a listing of words as in a published dictionary.

An important organizational principle in the lexicon is the lexical field. This is a group of lexemes which belong to a particular activity or area of specialist knowledge, such as the terms in cooking or sailing, or the vocabulary used by doctors, coal miners or mountain climbers. One effect is the use of specialist terms like phoneme in linguistics or gigabyte in computing. For example:

Blanket (1) verb. To cover as with a blanket.

Blanket (2) verb. Sailing. To block another vessel’s wind by sailing close to it on the windward side.

Ledger (1) noun. Bookkeeping. The main book which a company’s financial records are kept.

Ledger (2) noun. Angling. A trace that holds the bait above the bottom.

Dictionaries recognized the effect of lexical field by including in lexical entries labels like banking, medicine, etc, as in our example above.

Homonymy

Homonyms are unrelated senses of the same phonological word. Some authors distinguish between homographs, sense of the same written word, and
homophones, sense of the same spoken word. We can distinguish different types depending on their synthetic behavior, and spelling, for example:

1. Lexemes of the synthetic category, and with the same spelling: e.g. *lap* ‘circuit of a course’ and *lap* ‘part of body when sitting down’.
2. Lexemes of the synthetic category, but with different spelling; e.g. the verb *ring* and *wring*.
3. Lexemes of different categories, but with the same spelling: e.g. the verb *keep* and the noun *keep*.
4. Lexemes of different categories, and with different spelling: e.g. *not*, *knot*.

Of course variations in pronunciation mean that not all speakers have the same set of homonyms. Some English speakers for example pronounce the pairs *click* and *clique*, or *talk* and *torque*, in the same way, making these homonyms which are spelled differently.

**Polysemy**

There is a traditional distinction made in lexicology between homonymy and polysemy. Both deal with multiple senses of the same phonological word, but polysemy is invoked if the senses are judged to be related. This is an important distinction for lexicographers in the design of their dictionaries, and polysemous senses are listed under the same lexical entry, while homonymous senses are given separate entries. Lexicographers tend to use criteria of ‘relatedness’ to identify polysemy. These criteria include speakers’ intuitions, and what is known about the historical development of the items. We can take an example of distinction from *Collins Dictionary of the English Language* (Hanks 1986: 736) as
sample below shows; various senses of hook are treated as polysemy and therefore listed under one lexical entry:

**Hook** (hk) *n.* 1. a piece of material, usually metal, curved or bent and used to suspend, catch, hold, or pull something. 2. short for fish-hook. 3. a trap or a snare. 4. *chiefly U.S.* something that attracts or is intended to be an attraction. 5. something resembling a hook in design or use. 6.a. a sharp bend or angle in a geological formation. b. a sharply curved spit of land. 7. *boxing.* a short swinging blow delivered from the side with the elbow bent. 8. *cricket.* a shot in which the ball is hit square on the leg side with the bat held horizontally. 9. *golf.* a shot that causes the ball to go to the player’s left. 10. *surfing.* the top of the breaking wave, etc.

Two groups of senses of hooker on the other hand, as sample below, are treated as unrelated, therefore a case of homonymy, and given two separate entries:

**Hooker** (`hkð) *n.* 1. a commercial fishing boat using hooks and lines instead of nets. 2. a sailing boat of the west of Ireland formerly used for cargo and now for pleasure sailing and racing.

**Hooker** (`hkð) *n.* 1. a person or thing that hooks. 2. *U.S. and Canadian slang.* a. a draught of alcoholic drink. b. a prostitute. 3. *rugby.* the central forward in the front row of a scrum whose main job is to hook the ball.
2.3.3 Synonymy

Synonymy is the relationship between synonyms. Synonyms are different phonological words which have the same or very similar meanings. Some examples might be the pairs below:

Coach/sofa  boy/lad  lawyer/attorney  large/big

Even these few examples show that true or exact synonyms are very rare. As Palmer (1981) notes, the synonyms often have different distributions along a number of parameters. They may have belonged to different dialects and then become synonyms for speakers familiar with both dialects, like Irish English press and British English cupboard. Finally, as mentioned earlier, one or other of the synonyms may collocationally restrict. For example the sentences below might mean roughly the same thing in a some context:

She called out to the young lad

She called out to the young boy

In other context, however, the words lad and boy have different connotation, compare:

He always was a bit of a lad

He always was a bit of a boy

Or we might compare the synonymous in samples below:

A big house: a large house
2.3.4 Opposites (Antonymy)

Antonyms are words which are opposite in meaning. They can share an aspect of meaning but be opposite or incompatible in some other aspect of meaning. Ironically, the basic property of two words which are antonyms is that they often share all but one semantic property. The property they do not share is present in one and absent in the other. Thus, in order to be opposites, two words must be semantically very similar. For example: *high*<low, clever><stupid, etc.* antonyms are often employed in irony.

There are some kinds of antonymy:

*Simple antonyms* is a relation between words such that the positive of one implies the negative of the other. It is also called as complementary pairs or binary pairs. Examples:

Dead/Alive (of e.g. animals)

Pass/Fail (a test)

Hit/Miss (a target)

So, using these words literally, dead implies not alive, etc.

*Gradable antonyms* is a relationship between opposites where the positive of one term does not necessary imply the negative of the other, e.g. *rich/poor, fast/slow, beautiful/ugly.* This relation is typically associated with adjectives and
has three majors identifying characteristics: firstly, there are usually intermediate terms so that between the gradable antonyms hot and cool we can find:

Hot (warm tepid cool) cold

This mean of course that something may be neither hot nor cold. Secondly, the terms are usually relative, so a thick pencil is likely to be thinner than a thin girl. A third characteristic is that in some pairs one term is more basic and common, so for example of the pair long/short, it is more natural to ask of something how long is it? Than how short is it? Other examples of gradable antonyms are: tall/short, clever/stupid, near/far, and interesting/boring.

The next type of antonyms is reverse. The characteristic reverse relation is between terms describing movement, where one term describes movement in one direction, and the other the same movement in the opposite direction, for example the term push and pull on a swing door, which tell you in which direction to apply force. Other such pairs are come/go, go/return, and ascend/descend. When describing motion the following can be called reverses: (go) up/down, (go) in/out, (turn) right/left.

Converse is term which describe a relation between two entities from alternate viewpoints, as in the pairs:

Own/belong to

Above /below

Employer/employee
Thus if we are told *Alan owns this book* then we know automatically *this book belongs to Alan*. Or from *Helen is David’s employer* we know *David is Helen’s employee*.

The last kind of antonymy is *taxonomic sisters*. Taxonomies are classification systems; we take as an example the colour adjectives in English, and give a selection below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Red</th>
<th>Orange</th>
<th>Yellow</th>
<th>Green</th>
<th>Blue</th>
<th>Purple</th>
<th>Brown</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

We can say that the words *red* and *blue* are sister-members of the same taxonomy and therefore incompatible with each other. Hence one can say:

His car isn’t red, it’s blue.

Other taxonomies might include the days of the week: Sunday, Monday, etc, or any of the taxonomies we use to describe the natural world, like types of dog: *poodle, setter, bulldog*, etc. Some taxonomies are closed, like days of the week: we can’t easily add another day, without changing the whole system. Others are open, like the flavours of ice cream sold in an ice cream parlour: someone can always come up with a new flavour and extend the taxonomy.

### 2.3.5 Hyponymy

Hyponymy is a relation of inclusion. A hyponym includes the meaning a more general word, e.g.

*Dog and cat are hyponyms of animal*
Sister and mother are hyponyms of women

The more general term is called the superordinate or hyponym. Much of the vocabulary is linked by such systems of inclusion, and the resulting semantic networks from the hierarchical taxonomies mentioned above.

2.3.6 Meronymy

Meronymy is a term used to describe a part-whole relationship between lexical items. Thus cover and page are meronyms of book. We can identify this relationship by using sentence frame like X is part of Y, or Y has X as in A page is part of a book or A book has pages. Meronymy reflects hierarchical classification in the lexicon somewhat like taxonomies: a typical system might be:

```
car
   
   wheel        engine        door        window        etc.
   
   piston       valve        etc.
```

Meronymic hierarchies are less clear-cut and regular than taxonomies. Meronym vary for example in how necessary the part is to the whole.

Meronymy also differs from hyponymy in transitivity. Hyponymy is always transitive, as we saw, but meronym may or may not be. A transitive example is: nail as a meronym of finger, and finger of hand. We can see that nail
is meronymy of hand for we can say A hand has nails. A non transitive example is: pane is a meronym of window (A window has a pane), and window of room (A room has a widow); but pane is not a meronym of room, for we cannot say A room has a pane.

2.3.7 Member Collection

This is a relationship between the word for a unit and the usual word for a collection of the units. Examples:

Ship         fleet
Tree         forest
Fish         shoal
Book         library
Bird         flock

2.3.8 Portion Mass

This is the relation between a mass noun and the usual unit of measurement or division. A count noun is added to the mass noun, making the resulting noun phrase into a count nominal.

Drop of     liquid
Grain of    salt/sand/wheat
Lump of     coal