

JOHN LYONS

LINGUISTIC  
SEMANTICS

*An introduction*



*Linguistic Semantics: An Introduction* is the successor to Sir John Lyons's textbook *Language, Meaning and Context* (1981). While preserving the general structure of the earlier book, the author has substantially expanded its scope to introduce several topics that were not previously discussed, and to take account of new developments in linguistic semantics over the past decade. The resulting work is an invaluable guide to the subject, offering clarifications of its specialized terms and explaining its relationship to formal and philosophical semantics and to contemporary pragmatics. With its clear and accessible style it will appeal to a wide student readership.



# LINGUISTIC SEMANTICS



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## *Preface*

This book started life as a second edition of *Language, Meaning and Context* (1981) and, regrettably, in several places has been announced as forthcoming under that title. It now appears with a completely different title because, in the event, it has turned out to be a very different book. It is much longer; it deals with several topics that were not dealt with at all in the earlier book; and, above all, it is written at a different level and in a different style.

Many of these differences derive from the fact that *Linguistic Semantics* (*LS*), unlike its predecessor (*LMC*), is intended to be used as a textbook for courses in semantics given in departments of linguistics (and related disciplines) in colleges and universities. Although *LMC* was not conceived as a textbook, it was quite widely used as such, until it went out of print some years ago. I hope that *LS*, being written especially for students of linguistics, will prove to be much more satisfactory for this purpose.

In revising the original text, apart from taking account of such recent developments as seemed to me to be relevant to what is presented as an introduction to the subject, I have found myself obliged to add several new sections and to rewrite or expand others. I have, however, kept to the same general plan; as before, I have divided the book into four parts and ten chapters (amending the chapter titles when it appeared to be appropriate to do so); as far as possible, I have used the same examples to illustrate the same points, even though the points being made may now be formulated somewhat differently; much of the original text is still here (albeit with minor stylistic changes); and, finally, I have maintained (and explained in greater detail) the nota-

tional conventions used in *LMC* (which were first used in my two-volume *Semantics*, 1977). It should be possible therefore for those who are familiar with *LMC*, especially instructors and lecturers who have used it for their own courses, to find their way through *LS* without difficulty.

Much has happened in linguistic semantics in the last decade or so. Apart from anything else, the term 'linguistic semantics' is now more commonly used than it was when I employed it in the Preface to *LMC*; and this implies that it is now more widely recognized than it was at one time that there are several legitimately different kinds of semantics, each of which has its own disciplinary orientation or focus: linguistic, philosophical, anthropological, psychological, literary, etc. Recognition of this fact does not of course imply that the boundaries between these different kinds of semantics are impermeable or eternal or that everyone engaged in semantics will agree as to where the interdisciplinary boundaries should currently be drawn. My own view is essentially the same as it was when I wrote *LMC* (and *Semantics*).

For me, semantics is by definition the study of meaning; and linguistic semantics is the study of meaning in so far as it is systematically encoded in the vocabulary and grammar of (so-called) natural languages. This definition of linguistic semantics, as far as it goes, is relatively uncontroversial. But it is also almost wholly uninformative unless and until one goes on to say, first, what one means by 'meaning' and, second, what exactly is meant by 'encoded' in this context.

As I explain in greater detail in Chapter 1, I take a rather broader view of meaning than many linguists do. It follows that I include within the subject-matter of semantics – and therefore, if it is systematically encoded in the structure of natural languages, within the subject-matter of linguistic semantics – much that many linguists who take a more restrictive view of meaning than I do would exclude. In particular, I include much that they would deal with, not within semantics, but within what has come to be called pragmatics.

Those who draw a terminological distinction between 'semantics' and 'pragmatics' and take a narrower view of mean-

ing than I do will see this book as an introduction to what they think of as the broader, combined, field of linguistic semantics-and-pragmatics, and I have no objection to their tacitly retitling it accordingly. As far as the major substantive issues that are involved in drawing the distinction between semantics and pragmatics are concerned, these have to be discussed anyway, regardless of how broadly or narrowly one defines the term 'meaning' and in whatever way one maps out the field of linguistic semantics. Such issues, which include the distinction between meaning and use, between propositional (or representational) and non-propositional meaning, between competence and performance, between sentences and utterances, are fully discussed in the present book. I think it is true to say that there is now more agreement among linguists than there used to be about the relevance of the distinctions that I have mentioned and greater sophistication in drawing them. But there is as yet no consensus about the relative importance of particular topics.

I have described this book as an introductory textbook and have deliberately used the term 'Introduction' in its subtitle. This does not mean that I expect everything in it to be immediately comprehensible to those who come to it without any previous background in linguistics and with no previous knowledge of semantics. It is introductory in the sense that my *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics* (1968) was introductory: although it presupposes no previous specialized knowledge of its subject-matter, it is based on the assumption that those who use it, with or without an instructor, will have read, or will read in conjunction with it, some of the other works referred to in 'Suggestions for further reading'. I realize that some sections of the book, especially in the later chapters, will be quite demanding, even for students with some previous knowledge of linguistics, unless they also have, or are prepared to acquire, some knowledge of the relevant parts of logic and of the philosophy of language. But I would argue that no-one can hope to understand modern linguistic semantics without some knowledge of its philosophical underpinnings. I have tried to make everything as clear as possible in context and to give, non-technically,

as much of the philosophical background as is necessary for the purpose in hand.

My treatment of what I call linguistic semantics (which others, as I have explained, might refer to as a combination of linguistic semantics and pragmatics) is necessarily selective. It is also somewhat personal. In choosing the topics that I have chosen and in allotting to each of them the space that I have allotted to them, I have relied upon my own evaluation of their intrinsic or relative long-term importance, rather than upon the consensus of my colleagues (even where there is such a consensus). I have deliberately included several topics which are not dealt with at all, or in my view are dealt with unsatisfactorily, in otherwise comparable works. Students who use this book in class with an instructor will of course have the benefit of the instructor's commentary and criticism. However, in the interests of those who are reading the book without such guidance, I have tried to make it clear in the text itself when and in what respect I am presenting a non-standard view of a particular topic and why I think the standard view is defective, incomplete, or (as is frequently the case) imprecisely formulated. In saying this, however, I do not wish to exaggerate the differences between one view of linguistic semantics and another. Very often these differences are more apparent than real, and I shall be pleased if students using this book in conjunction with others come to the same conclusion.

No-one embarking upon the study of linguistic semantics these days can afford to be ignorant of at least the rudiments of formal semantics. One of my principal aims in writing this book, as it was in writing its predecessor, has been, on the one hand, to show how formal semantics, conceived as the analysis of a central part of the meaning of sentences – their propositional content – can be integrated within the broader field of linguistic semantics and, on the other, to demonstrate that formal, truth-conditional, semantics, as currently practised, fails to handle satisfactorily the non-propositional meaning that is also encoded, whether lexically or grammatically, in the sentences of particular natural languages. There are now available, as there were not when I wrote *LMC*, good textbooks of formal



semantics (which I mention in 'Suggestions for further reading'): I trust that my own book will be seen as complementary to these and, at certain points, will serve as an introduction to them. It is far less technical as far as the formalization of semantics is concerned. But at times I have provided rather more of the historical and philosophical context than they do.

It is because I have had the particular purpose of relating the content of this book to formal semantics that I have given proportionately more space to sentence-semantics and to utterance-semantics than I have to lexical semantics. It is only recently that linguists have been seriously concerned with the contribution that is made by grammatical structure to the meaning of sentences (and utterances), whereas this concern has always been central in formal semantics. There are aspects of lexical semantics that I do not deal with at all in the present book. These can be followed up in the other works to which readers are referred in 'Suggestions for further reading'. What I have tried to do is to show how lexical and non-lexical meaning fit together and are interdependent.

I should now say something about terminology. When it comes to the introduction of technical terms, non-specialists are often put off by what they see, initially, as esoteric and unnecessary jargon. Admittedly, specialists in any field of study are often guilty of using the jargon of their trade in contexts where it is inappropriate – in contexts where preciseness of reference is unimportant and where the esoteric jargon serves only to mystify those who are not familiar with it. There are other contexts, however, where the use of specialized terminology is essential if misunderstanding is to be avoided.

It is very difficult to write clearly and unambiguously about language in non-technical language and without a certain amount of formalism; and most authors who attempt to do so fail badly. What look, at first sight, like straightforward, plain-English, statements, when examined critically, usually turn out to be riddled with ambiguities or to be uninterpretable. The issues with which we shall be concerned, even at the level at which they are presented in this book, are inevitably rather technical in places; and there is a certain amount of specialized ter-

minology to be mastered. I have done my best to avoid the unnecessary use of specialized terms, but whenever clarity of exposition and precision are in conflict with the treacherous pseudo-simplicity of so-called plain English, I have almost always sacrificed the latter to the former.

I have also systematically avoided the use of many devices – such as near-synonyms for the sake of variety – which students are often taught to cultivate as hallmarks of a lively and attractive style and which are often deliberately exploited by writers of introductory textbooks in all subjects. Semanticists, more than most, must train themselves to identify and to control the ambiguities, the vagueness and the indeterminacy of everyday language. One way of doing so is by being deliberately and resolutely pedantic in one's use of terms and, as we shall see later, in one's use of particular notational conventions.

I am very grateful to Jean Aitchison for the help she gave me with the earlier book (*LMC*), as general editor of the series in which it appeared, and for the comments she made on the pre-final draft of the present book. I am similarly indebted to Rodney Huddleston for his invaluable critical comments on several points of detail. Since I have not always taken their advice (and may yet come to regret that I have not), they are not to be blamed for any errors, infelicities or inconsistencies that remain in the final text.

As always, I am greatly indebted to the editors that I have worked with at Cambridge University Press for their highly professional guidance at all stages (and for their patience), in this case to Marion Smith, who commissioned the book for the Press, and to Judith Ayling who, several years later, saw it through to completion. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Julia Harding, who has once again acted as my copy editor and has dealt cheerfully and competently with a difficult and messy typescript, eliminating many inconsistencies and errors.

*December 1994*

John Lyons  
*Trinity Hall, Cambridge*

## *Symbols and typographical conventions*

$\&$	conjunction
$\vee$	disjunction
$\rightarrow$	implication
$\Rightarrow$	entailment
$\Leftrightarrow$	symmetrical entailment
$\equiv$	equivalence operator
$\sim$	negation operator
$(x)$ or $(\forall x)$	universal quantifier
$(E)$ or $(\exists)$	existential quantifier
$\mathcal{N}$ or $\square$	necessity
$\mathcal{M}$ or $\diamond$	possibility
$t_0$	temporal zero-point

### SMALL CAPITALS

For sense-components and other more abstract elements, or correlates, of meaning.

### *Italics*

1. For forms (as distinct from lexemes or expressions) in their orthographic representation.
2. For certain mathematical and logical symbols, according to standard conventions.

### ‘Single quotation-marks’

1. For lexemes and expressions.
2. For the citation of sentences (i.e. system-sentences).
3. For book titles.

### “Double quotation-marks”

1. For meanings.
2. For propositions.
3. For quotations from other authors.

### **Bold type**

For technical terms and for emphasis



## PART I

### *Setting the scene*

#### CHAPTER I

### *Metalinguistic preliminaries*

#### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, which constitutes the whole of Part I, we deal with a number of concepts which are fundamental to the whole enterprise of putting linguistic semantics on a sound theoretical footing. Although it is one of the longest chapters in the book and includes several sections containing material which, at times, is quite demanding for those who are new to the subject, I have deliberately not divided it into two (or more) chapters, because I wish to emphasize the fact that everything that is dealt with here hangs together and is equally relevant throughout.

Readers who find some of the material difficult on a first reading should not be too concerned about this. They can come back to it as they proceed through the following three parts of the book and see how the various technical distinctions that are drawn here are actually used. Indeed, this is the only way of being sure that one has understood them. The fact that I have brought together, at the beginning of the book, some of the more fundamental terminological and notational distinctions which are relevant throughout should make it easier for readers to refer back to them. It should also make it easier for them to see how the conceptual and terminological framework that I am adopting compares with that adopted in other works that are referred to in 'Suggestions for further reading'.

We begin and end the chapter with the most fundamental question of all, the question to which semantics, linguistic and non-linguistic, seeks to provide a theoretically and empirically

satisfying answer: what is meaning? This question is posed non-technically in section 1.1; in section 1.7, we look briefly at some of the general answers that have been proposed by philosophers, linguists and others in the past and more recently.

Between these two sections I have inserted a section (1.2) on what I have called the metalanguage of semantics and a section (1.3) which sets out in greater detail than I have done in the Preface the scope of linguistic semantics. That there should be a section dealing with the relation between linguistic and non-linguistic semantics is only to be expected. It is important that readers should realize that there are various ways in which the subfield of linguistic semantics is defined by specialists as part of the broader fields of semantics, on the one hand, and of linguistics, on the other, and that they should be able to see from the outset the way in which my definition of 'linguistic semantics' differs from that of other authors.

The term 'metalanguage' and the corresponding adjective 'metalinguistic', as we shall see in the later chapters of this book, are quite commonly employed nowadays in the discussion of particular issues in linguistic semantics. (The two terms are fully explained in section 1.2.) It is not often, however, that theorists and practitioners of linguistic semantics discuss explicitly and in general terms the relation between the everyday metalanguage of semantics and the more technical metalanguage that they use in the course of their work. I have devoted some space to this topic here because its importance, in my view, is not as widely acknowledged as it ought to be.

The next three sections introduce a number of distinctions – between language and speech, 'langue' and 'parole', 'competence' and 'performance'; between form and meaning; between sentences and utterances – which, nowadays, are all more or less generally accepted as part of the linguist's stock-in-trade, though they are not always defined in exactly the same way. Once again, I have given rather more space to some of these distinctions than is customary. I have also sought to clarify what is often confused, especially in the discussion of sentences and utterances, on the one hand, and in the discussion of competence and performance, on the other. And I have explained

these distinctions, of course, in the present context with particular reference to their application in semantics (and pragmatics) and to the use that is made of them in the organization of this book.

### 1.1 THE MEANING OF 'MEANING'

Semantics is traditionally defined as the study of meaning; and this is the definition which we shall initially adopt. But do all kinds of meaning fall within the scope of semantics, or only some? What is meant by 'meaning' in this context?

The noun 'meaning' and the verb 'mean', from which it is derived, are used, like many other English words, in a wide range of contexts and in several distinguishable senses. For example, to take the case of the verb: if one says

(1) *Mary means well,*

one implies that Mary is well-intentioned, that she intends no harm. This implication of intention would normally be lacking, however, in an utterance such as

(2) *That 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 a previously established convention) to indicate that there is danger in the surrounding environment, such as a crevasse on a snowy hillside or the imminent use of explosives in a nearby quarry. Similar to the red-flag use of the verb 'mean', in one respect at least, is its use in

(3) *Smoke means fire.*

In both (2) and (3) one thing is said to be a **sign** of something else: from the presence of the sign, a red flag or smoke, anyone with the requisite knowledge can infer the existence of what it **signifies**, danger or fire, as the case may be.

But there is also an important difference between (2) and (3). Whereas smoke is a **natural** sign of fire, causally connected with what it signifies, the red flag is a **conventional** sign of danger: it is a culturally established **symbol**. These distinctions

between the intentional and the non-intentional, on the one hand, and between what is natural and what is conventional, or symbolic, on the other, have long played a central part in the theoretical investigation of meaning and continue to do so.

That the verb 'mean' is being employed in different senses in the examples that I have used so far is evident from the fact that

(4) *Mary means trouble*

is ambiguous: it can be taken like (1) *Mary means well* or like (3) *Smoke means fire*. Indeed, with a little imagination it is possible to devise a context, or scenario, in which the verb 'mean' in (4) *Mary means trouble* can be plausibly interpreted in the way that it would normally be interpreted in (2) *That red flag means danger*. And, conversely, if we are prepared to suspend our normal **ontological assumptions** – i.e., our assumptions about the world – and to treat the red flag referred to in (2) as an animate being with its own will and intentions, we can no less plausibly interpret (2) in the way in which we would normally interpret (1).

Most language-utterances, whether spoken or written, depend for their interpretation – to a greater or less degree – upon the context in which they are used. And included within the context of utterance, it must not be forgotten, are the ontological beliefs of the participants: many of these will be culturally determined and, though normally taken for granted, can be challenged or rejected. The vast majority of natural-language utterances, actual and potential, have a far wider range of meanings, or interpretations, than first occur to us when they are put to us out of context. This is a point which is not always given due emphasis by semanticists.

Utterances containing the verb 'mean' (or the noun 'meaning') are no different from other English utterances in this respect. And it is important to remember that the verb 'mean' and the noun 'meaning' are ordinary words of English in other respects also. It must not be assumed that all natural languages have words in their everyday vocabulary which can be put into exact correspondence with the verb 'mean' and the noun 'meaning' grammatically and semantically. This is a second important



point which needs to be properly emphasized, and I will come back to it later (1.2).

Let us now take yet another sense (or meaning) of the verb 'mean'. If one says

(5) '*Soporific*' means "*tending to produce sleep*",

one is obviously not imputing intentionality to the English word 'soporific'. It might be argued, however, that there is an essential, though indirect, connexion between what people mean, or intend, and what the words that they use are conventionally held to mean. This point has been much discussed by philosophers of language. Since it is not relevant to the central concerns of this book, I will not pursue it here. Nor will I take up the related point, that there is also an intrinsic, and possibly more direct, connexion between what people mean and what they mean to say. On the other hand, in Chapters 8 and 9 I shall be drawing upon a particular version of the distinction between saying what one means and meaning what one says – another distinction that has been extensively discussed in the philosophy of language.

Intentionality is certainly of importance in any theoretical account that one might give of the meaning of language-utterances, even if it is not a property of the words of which these utterances are composed. For the moment, let us simply note that it is the meaning of the verb 'mean' exemplified in (5), rather than the meaning exemplified in

(6) *Mary didn't really mean what she said,*

which is of more immediate concern in linguistics.

We have noted that the noun 'meaning' (and the corresponding verb 'mean') has many meanings. But the main point that I want to make in this section is, not so much that there are many meanings, or senses, of 'meaning'; it is rather that these several meanings are interconnected and shade into one another in various ways. This is why the investigation of what is referred to as meaning (in one sense or another of the English word 'meaning') is of concern to so many disciplines and does not fall wholly within any single one of them. It follows that, if semantics is

defined as the study of meaning, there will be many different, but intersecting, branches of semantics: philosophical semantics, psychological semantics, anthropological semantics, logical semantics, linguistic semantics, and so on.

It is **linguistic semantics** with which we are primarily concerned in this book; and, whenever I employ the term 'semantics' without further qualification, it is to be understood as referring, more narrowly, to linguistic semantics. Similarly, whenever I employ the term 'language' without qualification, it is to be understood as referring to what are commonly called **natural languages**. But what is linguistic semantics and how does it differ from non-linguistic semantics? And how do so-called natural languages differ, semantically and otherwise, from other kinds of languages? These are the questions which we shall address in section 1.3. But something should first be said about terminology and style, and more generally about the technical and non-technical **metalanguage** of semantics.

## 1.2 THE METALANGUAGE OF SEMANTICS

We could have gone on for a long time enumerating and discussing examples of the different meanings of 'meaning' in the preceding section. If we had done so and if we had then tried to translate all our examples into other natural languages (French, German, Russian, etc.), we would soon have come to appreciate the force of one of the points made there, that 'meaning' (and the verb from which it is derived) is a word of English which has no exact equivalent in other, quite familiar, languages. We would also have seen that there are contexts in which the noun 'meaning' and the verb 'mean' are not in correspondence with one another. But this is not a peculiarity of English or of these two words. As we shall see later, most everyday, non-technical, words and expressions in all natural languages are like the noun 'meaning' or the verb 'mean' in that they have several meanings which cannot always be sharply distinguished from one another (or alternatively a range of meaning within which several distinctions can be drawn) and may be somewhat vague or indeterminate. One of the most important tasks that we have to

accomplish in the course of this book is to furnish ourselves with a technical vocabulary which is, as far as possible, precise and unambiguous.

In doing so, we shall be constructing what semanticists refer to as a **metalanguage**: i.e., a language which is used to describe language. Now it is a commonplace of philosophical semantics that natural languages (in contrast with many non-natural, or artificial, formal languages) contain their own metalanguage: they may be used to describe, not only other languages (and language in general), but also themselves. The property by virtue of which a language may be used to refer to itself (in whole or in part) I will call **reflexivity**. Philosophical problems that can be caused by this kind of reflexivity will not be of direct concern to us here. But there are other aspects of reflexivity, and more generally of the metalinguistic function of natural languages, which do need to be discussed.

The metalanguage that we have used so far and shall continue to use throughout this book is English: to be more precise, it is more or less ordinary (but non-colloquial) **Standard English** (which differs in various ways from other kinds of English). And whenever I use the term 'English' without further qualification this is the language (or dialect) to which I am referring. Ordinary (Standard) English is not of course absolutely uniform throughout the world or across all social groups in any one English-speaking country or region, but such differences of vocabulary and grammatical structure as there are between one variety of Standard English (British, American, Australian, etc.) and another are relatively unimportant in the present context and should not cause problems.

We have now explicitly adopted English as our metalanguage. But if we are aiming for precision and clarity, English, like other natural languages, cannot be used for metalinguistic purposes without modification. As far as the metalinguistic vocabulary of natural languages is concerned, there are two kinds of modification open to us: **regimentation** and **extension**. We can take existing everyday words, such as 'language', 'sentence', 'word', 'meaning' or 'sense', and subject them to strict control (i.e., **regiment** their use), defining them or

re-defining them for our own purposes (just as physicists re-define 'force' or 'energy' for their specialized purposes). Alternatively, we can **extend** the everyday vocabulary by introducing into it technical terms which are not normally used in everyday discourse.

In the preceding section, we noted that the everyday English word 'meaning' has a range of distinguishable, but interconnected, meanings. It would be open to us at this point to do what many semanticists writing in English do these days: we could **regiment** the use of the word 'meaning' by deliberately assigning to it a narrower, more specialized, sense than it bears in normal everyday discourse. And we could then employ this narrower, more specialized, definition of 'meaning' to restrict the field of semantics to only part of what is traditionally covered by the term 'semantics' in linguistics, philosophy and other disciplines. In this book, we shall adopt the alternative strategy. We shall continue to use both the noun 'meaning' and the verb 'mean' as non-technical terms, with their full range of everyday meanings (or senses). And for the time being we shall continue to operate with a correspondingly broad definition of 'semantics': until such time as it is re-defined, semantics for us will continue to be, by definition, the study of meaning. It should be mentioned, however, that nowadays many authorities adopt a rather narrower definition of 'semantics', based on the regimentation of the word 'meaning' (or one of its near-equivalents) in other languages. I will come back to this point (see 1.6).

Although the ordinary-language word 'meaning' will be retained without re-definition in the metalanguage which we are now constructing, several composite expressions containing the word 'meaning' will be introduced and defined as we proceed and will be used thereafter as technical terms. For instance, later in this chapter distinctions will be introduced between **propositional** and **non-propositional meaning**, on the one hand, and between **sentence-meaning** and **utterance-meaning**, on the other; and these will be subsequently related, with various other distinctions, to the distinction that is commonly drawn nowadays between **semantics** (in the narrow sense) and **pragmatics**. In Chapter 3, **sense** and **denotation**

will be distinguished as interdependent aspects or dimensions of the meaning of words and phrases. **Reference** will be distinguished from denotation initially in Chapter 3 and then in more detail in Chapter 10. Once again, until they are formally defined or re-defined these three terms – and especially the word ‘sense’ – will be used non-technically. So too will all other words and expressions of ordinary everyday English (including the nouns ‘language’ and ‘speech’ and such semantically related verbs as ‘speak’, ‘say’ and ‘utter’, which will be dealt with in some detail in section 1.4).

As will be explained in a later chapter, in recent years linguists and logicians have constructed various highly **formalized** (i.e., mathematically precise) **non-natural** metalanguages in order to be able to describe natural languages as precisely as possible. It will be important for us to take a view, in due course, about the relation between the formal, non-natural, metalanguages of logical semantics and the regimented and extended, more or less ordinary, metalanguage with which we are operating. Which, if either, is more basic than the other? And what does ‘basic’ mean in this context?

It is of course written English that we are using as our metalanguage; and we are using it to refer to both written and spoken language, and also (when this is appropriate) to refer to languages and to language-utterances considered independently of the **medium** in which they are realized. In our regimentation of ordinary written English for metalinguistic purposes, it will be useful to establish a number of notational conventions, which will enable us to refer unambiguously to a variety of linguistic units. Such more or less ordinary notational conventions as are employed metalinguistically in this book (italics, quotation marks, etc.) will be formally introduced in section 1.5 (see also the list of symbols and typographical conventions on p. xvii).

As far as the everyday metalinguistic use of the spoken language is concerned, there are certain rules and conventions which all native speakers follow without ever having been taught them and without normally being conscious of them. But these have not been fully codified and cannot prevent misunderstanding in all contexts. Phoneticians have developed

special notational systems for the representation of spoken utterances with great precision. However, in the everyday, non-technical, use of English (and other natural languages) there is no conventionally accepted written representation of intonation, rhythm, stress and other non-verbal features, which are a normal and essential part of speech. As we shall see later, such features have many communicative and expressive functions.

Here, I want to draw attention to the fact that they may also have a metalinguistic function. For example,

(7) *John said it was raining*

can be pronounced in various ways. In particular it can be uttered with a characteristic prosodic transition between *said* and *it*, which would distinguish in speech what is conventionally distinguished in the written language as

(8) *John said [that] it was raining*

and

(9) *John said, "It was raining".*

In this case, there is a more or less generally accepted convention – the use of quotation-marks – which serves to distinguish direct from indirect discourse in written English. But there are recognized alternatives to the use of quotation-marks. And even when quotation-marks are used, the conventions for using them are not fully codified or universally accepted: for example, different writers and different printing houses have their own rules for the use of single and double quotation-marks. As I have already mentioned, my own conventions for the metalinguistic use of single and double quotation-marks (and for the metalinguistic use of italics) will be explained in a later section (1.5).

There are many ordinary-language metalinguistic statements which are unambiguous when spoken, but not necessarily when written. Conversely, because there is nothing in normal speech that is in direct one-to-one correspondence with the punctuation marks and **diacritics** of written language (underlining, italics or bold type for emphasis, quotation-marks, capital letters,

etc.), there are many ordinary-language metalinguistic statements which are unambiguous when written, but not when spoken. For example,

(10) *I can't stand Sebastian*

differs from

(11) *I can't stand 'Sebastian',*

in that (10) might be interpreted as a statement about a person whose name happens to be 'Sebastian' and (11) as a statement about the name 'Sebastian' itself. But the conventional use of quotation-marks for such purposes in ordinary written English is not obligatory. And, as we shall see presently, it needs to be properly regimented (as does the use of other notational diacritics) if it is to do the job we want it to do as part of the meta-language of semantics.

### 1.3 LINGUISTIC AND NON-LINGUISTIC SEMANTICS

The English adjective 'linguistic' is ambiguous. It can be understood as meaning either "pertaining to language" or "pertaining to linguistics".

The term 'linguistic semantics' is correspondingly ambiguous. Given that semantics is the study of meaning, 'linguistic semantics' can be held to refer either to the study of meaning in so far as this is expressed in language or, alternatively, to the study of meaning within linguistics. It is being employed here, and throughout this book, in the second of these two senses. Linguistic semantics, then, is a branch of linguistics, just as philosophical semantics is a branch of philosophy, psychological semantics is a branch of psychology, and so on.

Since linguistics is generally defined as the study of language, it might be thought that the distinction which I have just drawn between the two senses of 'linguistic semantics' is a distinction without a difference. But this is not so. Linguistics does not aim to deal with everything that falls within the scope of the word 'language'. Like all academic disciplines, it establishes its own theoretical framework. As I have already explained in

respect of the word ‘meaning’, linguistics reserves the right to re-define for its own purposes everyday words such as ‘language’ and does not necessarily employ them in the way in which they are employed, whether technically or non-technically, outside linguistics. Moreover, as we shall see in the following section, the English word ‘language’ is ambiguous, so that the phrase ‘the study of meaning in language’ is open to two quite different interpretations. There are therefore, in principle, not just two, but three, ways in which the term ‘linguistic semantics’ can be interpreted. And the same is true of the phrase ‘linguistic meaning’ (for the same reason). This point also will be developed in the following section. Meanwhile, I will continue to employ the everyday English word ‘language’ without specialized restriction or re-definition.

Of all the disciplines with an interest in meaning, linguistics is perhaps the one to which it is of greatest concern. Meaningfulness, or **semanticity**, is generally taken to be one of the defining properties of language; and there is no reason to challenge this view. It is also generally taken for granted by linguists that natural languages are, of their essence, communicative: i.e., that they have developed or evolved – that they have been, as it were, designed – for the purpose of communication and interaction and that their so-called **design-properties** – and, more particularly, their grammatical and semantic structure – fit them for this purpose and are otherwise mysterious and inexplicable. This view has been challenged recently within linguistics and philosophy. For the purposes of this book we can remain neutral on this issue. I will continue to assume, as most linguists do, that natural languages are properly described as **communication-systems**. I must emphasize however that nothing of consequence turns on this assumption. Although many kinds of behaviour can be described as meaningful, the range, diversity and complexity of meaning expressed in language is unmatched in any other kind of human or non-human communicative behaviour. Part of the difference between communication by means of language and other kinds of communicative behaviour derives from the properties of intentionality and conventionality, referred to in section 1.1.



A non-human animal normally expresses its feelings or attitudes by means of behaviour which appears to be non-intentional and non-conventional. For example, a crab will signal aggression by waving a large claw. Human beings, on the other hand, will only rarely express their anger, whether intentionally or not, by shaking their fist. More often, they will convey feelings such as aggression by means of language-utterances such as

(12) *You'll be sorry for this*

or

(13) *I'll sue you*

or

(14) *How dare you behave like that!.*

True, the tone of the utterance will generally be recognizably aggressive; and it may also be accompanied with a recognizably aggressive gesture or facial expression. But as far as the words which are used are concerned, it is clear that there is no natural, non-conventional, link between their form and their meaning: as we noted in the preceding section, the words are, in this sense, **arbitrary**. So too is much of the grammatical structure of natural languages which serves to express meaning. And, as we shall see throughout this book, there is much more to accounting for the semanticity of language – its capacity to express meaning – than simply saying what each word means.

It should also be emphasized at this point that, although much of the structure of natural-language utterances is arbitrary, or conventional, there is also a good deal of non-arbitrariness in them. One kind of non-arbitrariness is commonly referred to these days as **iconicity**. Roughly speaking, an iconic sign is one whose form is explicable in terms of similarity between the form of the sign and what it signifies: signs which lack this property of similarity are non-iconic. As linguists have been aware for centuries, in all natural languages there are words which are traditionally described as **onomatopoeic**, such as *splash*, *bang*, *crash* or *cuckoo*, *peewit*, etc. in English; they are nowadays classified under the more general term 'iconic'. But these are relatively

few in number. More important for us is the fact that, although much of the grammatical structure of natural languages is arbitrary, far more of it is iconic than standard textbooks of linguistics are prepared to concede. Most important of all, however, from this point of view, is the partial iconicity of the **non-verbal** component of natural-language utterances.

Spoken utterances, in particular, will contain, in addition to the words of which they are composed, a particular intonation-contour and stress-pattern: these are referred to technically as **prosodic features**. They are an integral part of the utterances in which they occur, and they must not be thought of as being in any sense secondary or optional. Prosodic features, in all natural languages, are to a considerable degree (though not wholly) iconic. Spoken utterances may also be accompanied by what are called **paralinguistic features** – popularly, but inaccurately, called body-language (gestures, posture, eye movements, facial expressions, etc.). As the term ‘paralinguistic’ suggests, these are not regarded by linguists as being an integral part of the utterances with which they are associated. In this respect, they differ from prosodic features. But paralinguistic features too are meaningful, and, like prosodic features, they serve to **modulate** and to **punctuate** the utterances which they accompany. They tend to be even more highly iconic, or otherwise non-arbitrary, than prosodic features. In both cases, however, their non-arbitrariness is blended with an equally high degree of conventionality: that is to say, the prosodic features of spoken languages and the paralinguistic gestures that are associated with spoken utterances in particular languages (or dialects) in particular cultures (or subcultures) vary from language to language and have to be learned as part of the normal process of language-acquisition.

Written language does not have anything which directly corresponds to the prosodic or paralinguistic features of spoken language. However, punctuation marks (the full stop, or period, the comma, the question-mark, etc.) and capitals, italics, underlining, etc. are roughly equivalent in function. Hence my use of the term ‘punctuation’ as a technical term of linguistic semantics for both spoken and written language.

Another kind of non-arbitrariness, to which semanticists have given increasing attention in recent years, is **indexicality**. An **index**, as the term was originally defined, is a sign which, in some sense, calls attention to – **indicates** (or **is indicative of**) – what it signifies (in the immediate situation) and which thereby serves as a clue, as it were, to the presence or existence (in the immediate situation) of whatever it is that it signifies. For example, smoke is an index of fire; slurred speech may indicate drunkenness; and so on. In these two cases there is a causal connexion between the index and what it indicates. But this is not considered to be essential. In fact, the term ‘index’, as it was originally defined, covered a variety of things which have little in common other than that of focusing attention on some aspect of the immediate physical situation. One of the consequences is that the term ‘indexicality’ has been used in several conflicting senses in the more recent literature. I will select just one of those senses and explain it in Chapter 10. Until then, I will make no further use of the terms ‘index’, ‘indexical’ or ‘indexicality’.

I will however employ the verb ‘indicate’ (and also ‘be indicative of’) in the sense in which I have used it of smoke and slurred speech in the preceding paragraph. When one says that smoke means fire or that slurred speech is a sign of drunkenness, one implies, not merely that they call attention to the presence of fire or drunkenness (in the immediate situation), but that fire is the source of the smoke and that it is the person whose speech is slurred who is drunk. If we make this a defining condition of **indication**, in what I will now adopt as a technical sense of the term, we can say that a good deal of information that is expressed in spoken utterances is indicative of the biological, psychological or social characteristics of their source. For example, a person’s accent will generally be indicative of his or her social or geographical provenance; so too, on occasion, will the selection of one, rather than another, of two otherwise synonymous expressions.

How then do linguists deal with the meaning of language-utterances? And how much of it do they classify as linguistic (in the sense of “falling within the scope of linguistics”) rather than as paralinguistic (or extralinguistic)? Linguists’ ways of dealing

with any part of their subject-matter vary, as do those of specialists in other disciplines, in accordance with the prevailing intellectual climate. Indeed, there have been times in the recent past, notably in the United States in the period between 1930 and the end of the 1950s, when linguistic semantics was very largely neglected. One reason for this was that the investigation of meaning was felt to be inherently subjective (in the pejorative sense of the word) and, at least temporarily, beyond the scope of science.

A more particular reason for the comparative neglect of linguistic semantics was the influence of behaviourist psychology upon some, though not all, schools of American linguistics. Largely as a result of Chomsky's criticisms of behaviourism in the late 1950s and the subsequent revolutionary impact of his theory of generative grammar, not only upon linguistics, but also upon other academic disciplines, including philosophy and psychology, the influence of behaviourism is no longer as strong as it was a generation ago. Not only linguists, but also philosophers and psychologists, are now prepared to admit as data much that was previously rejected as subjective (in the pejorative sense of the word) and unreliable.

This book concentrates upon linguistic semantics, and it does so from what many would classify as a traditional point of view. But it also pays due attention to those developments which have taken place as a consequence of the increased collaboration that there has been, in recent years, between linguists and representatives of other disciplines, including formal logic and the philosophy of language, and examines the strengths and weaknesses of some of the most important notions which linguistic semantics currently shares with various kinds of non-linguistic semantics.

#### 1.4 LANGUAGE, SPEECH AND UTTERANCE; 'LANGUE' AND 'PAROLE'; 'COMPETENCE' AND 'PERFORMANCE'

The English word 'language', like the word 'meaning', has a wide range of meaning (or meanings). But the first and most important point to be made about the word 'language' is that

(like 'meaning' and several other English nouns) it is **categorially ambivalent** with respect to the semantically relevant property of **countability**: i.e., it can be used (like 'thing', 'idea', etc.) as a count noun (which means that, when it is used in the singular, it must be combined with an article, definite or indefinite, or some other kind of **determiner**); it can also be used (like 'water', 'information', etc.) as a mass noun (i.e., non-count noun), which does not require a determiner and which normally denotes not an individual entity of set or entities, but an unbounded mass or aggregate of stuff or substance. Countability is not given grammatical recognition – is not **grammaticalized** (either morphologically or syntactically) – in all natural languages (cf. 10.1). And in those languages in which it is grammaticalized, it is grammaticalized in a variety of ways.

What is of concern to us here is the fact that when the word 'language' is used as a mass noun in the singular (without a determiner) the expression containing it can be, but need not be, semantically equivalent to an expression containing the plural form of 'language' used as a count noun. This has the effect that some statements containing the word 'language' in the singular are ambiguous. One such example (adapted from the second paragraph of section 1.2 above) is

(15) *A metalanguage is a language which is used to describe language.*

Another is

(16) *Linguistics is the scientific study of language.*

Do (15) and (16) mean the same, respectively, as

(17) *A metalanguage is a language which is used to describe languages*  
and

(18) *Linguistics is the scientific study of languages?*

This question cannot be answered without reference to the context in which (15) and (16) occur, and it may not be answerable even in context. What should be clear however, on reflection if not immediately, is that (15) and (16), as they stand and out of context, are ambiguous, according to whether they

are interpreted as being semantically equivalent to (17) and (18), respectively, or not.

The reason for this particular ambiguity is that, whenever the word 'language' is used as a mass noun, as in (15) and (16), the expression containing it may be referring, not to a set of languages, each of which is (or can be described as) a **system** of words and grammatical rules, but to the spoken or written **products** of (the use of) a particular system or set of systems. What may be referred to as the **system-product ambiguity** of many expressions containing the English word 'language' correlates with the fact, which has just been noted, that the English word 'language' (like many other nouns in English) is syntactically ambivalent: i.e., it belongs to two syntactically distinct subclasses of nouns (count nouns and mass nouns). And it so happens that, when it is used as a mass noun in the singular, the expression containing it can refer either to the product of (the use of) a language or to the totality (or a sample) of languages.

Expressions containing the words 'English', 'French', 'German', etc. exhibit a related, but rather different, kind of system-product ambiguity when they are used as mass nouns in the singular (in certain contexts). For example,

(19) *That is English*

may be used to refer either to a particular text or utterance as such or, alternatively, to the **language-system** of which particular texts or utterances are the products. That this is a genuine ambiguity is evident from the fact that in one interpretation of (19), but not the other, the single-word expression 'English' may be replaced with the phrase 'the English language'. It is obvious that one cannot identify any particular English utterance with the English language. It is also obvious that, in cases like this, the syntactic ambivalence upon which the ambiguity turns, is not between count nouns and mass nouns, as such, but between proper (count) nouns and common (mass) nouns.

What I have referred to as the system-product ambiguity associated with the categorial ambivalence of the word 'language' is obvious enough, once it has been explained. But it has been, and continues to be, the source of a good deal of

theoretical confusion. One way of avoiding at least some of this confusion is to adopt the policy of never using the English word 'language' metalinguistically as a mass noun when the expression containing it could be replaced, without change of meaning, with an expression containing the plural form of 'language' used as a count noun. This policy will be adhered to consistently in all that follows; and students are advised to adopt the same policy themselves.

Another way of avoiding, or reducing, the ambiguity and confusion caused by the syntactic (or categorial) ambivalence of the everyday English word 'language' and by its several meanings is to coin a set of more specialized terms to replace it. Such are the now widely used 'langue' and 'parole', which were first employed technically by Saussure (1916), writing in French, and 'competence' and 'performance', which were introduced into linguistics as technical terms by Chomsky (1965).

In everyday, non-technical, French the noun 'langue' is one of two words which, taken together, have much the same range of meaning or meanings as the English word 'language'. The other is 'langage'. The two French words differ from one another grammatically and semantically in several respects. Two such differences are relevant in the present context: (i) 'langue', in contrast with 'langage', is always used as a count noun; (ii) 'langue' denotes what are commonly referred to as natural languages and, unlike 'langage', is not normally used to refer (a) to the artificial (i.e., non-natural) formal languages of logicians, mathematicians, and computer scientists, (b) to such extralinguistic or paralinguistic communication systems as what is popularly called body-language, or (c) to non-human systems of communication. The fact that French (like Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and other Romance languages) has two semantically non-equivalent words, one of which is much more general than the other, to cover what is covered by the English word 'language' is interesting in itself. It reinforces the point made earlier about the English word 'meaning': the everyday metalanguage that is contained in one natural language is not necessarily equivalent semantically, in whole or in part, to the metalanguage contained in other natural languages. But this

fact has been mentioned here in connexion with the Saussurean distinction between 'langue' and 'parole'.

Expressions containing the French word 'langue' are subject to the same kind of system-product ambiguity as are expressions containing the English word 'language'. But expressions containing the word 'langue' are not. They always refer to what I am calling language-systems (and by virtue of the narrow range of 'langue', in contrast with the English word 'language', to what are commonly called natural languages). This holds true regardless of whether 'langue' is being used technically or non-technically in French.

The word 'parole' has a number of related, or overlapping, meanings in everyday French. In the meaning which concerns us here it covers part of what is covered by the French word 'langue' and the English word 'language' when they are being used as mass nouns. It denotes the product or products of the use of a language-system. Unlike 'langue' and 'language', however, it is restricted to spoken language: i.e., to the product of speech. Consequently, the Saussurean distinction between 'langue' and 'parole' has frequently been misrepresented, in English, as also in several other European languages including German and Russian, as a distinction between language and speech.

The essential distinction, as we have seen, is between a system (comprising a set of grammatical rules and a vocabulary) and the products of (the use of) the system. It will be noted that here, as earlier in this section, I have inserted in parentheses the phrase 'the use of'. This brings us to a second point which must be made, not only about the Saussurean distinction between 'langue' and 'parole', but also about the Chomskyan distinction between 'competence' and 'performance', which has also given rise to a good deal of theoretical confusion.

By 'competence' (more fully, 'linguistic competence' or 'grammatical competence') Chomsky means the language-system which is stored in the brains of individuals who are said to know, or to be competent in, the language in question. Linguistic competence in this sense is always competence in a particular language. It is normally acquired by so-called native speakers in childhood (in normal environmental