



## The Links between Pragmatics and Semantics

Olalaye Joel Iyiola<sup>1</sup>, \*Acheoah John Emike<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of English, Waziri Umar Federal Polytechnic, Birnin-Kebbi, Kebbi State, Nigeria.

<sup>2</sup>Department of European Languages, Federal University Birnin-Kebbi, Kebbi State, Nigeria

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.8253470

Submission Date: 31 July 2023 | Published Date: 17 Aug. 2023

\*Corresponding author: Acheoah John Emike (PhD)

Department of European Languages, Federal University Birnin-Kebbi, Kebbi State, Nigeria

### Abstract

This paper examines the links between pragmatics and semantics with a view to explaining the underpinnings of such links. Pragmatics is the use and interpretation of verbal and non-verbal communication according to context. Semantics on the other hand, is the study of meaning, particularly in terms of the rules of language. The literature of pragmatics and semantics is replete with contentious perspectives on the connections or “extent of connections” between pragmatics and semantics. The paper explores Traugott’s (1989) Tendency of Semantic Change theory as a theoretical framework, and concludes that links abound between pragmatics and semantics because pragmatic use and interpretation of language in a communicative event is a demonstration of some appreciable knowledge of the linguistic conventions (semantics) of the language being used for the communicative event.

**Keywords:** pragmatics, semantics, link, sense, reference, Semantic Change Theory.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is invariably an investigation of meaning within the purview of pragmatics and semantics. Scholar’s view meaning as “social action” produced in varied communication contexts and situations; emphasis is on performance rather than obeying linguistic conventions (rules). Semantics is immersed in linguistic rules (formal properties of language) whereas pragmatics is a non-formalist approach to language study. Investigating the links between the two disciplines is a worthy intellectual endeavour. The paper explores insights from the literature of both disciplines to establish the links between both disciplines.

## 2. Pragmatics

According to Yule (1996), pragmatics is “the study of meaning as communicated by a speaker and interpreted by a listener or reader.” Mey (2001) defines pragmatics as “the use of language in human communication as determined by the conditions of the society.” Pragmatics is a field of language study. The Encyclopedia Americana (1994) defines pragmatics as “the subfield of the study of language that investigates the techniques by which language is processed for communication purposes.” According to Crystal and Varley (1993) “pragmatics is the study of the factors that govern our choice of language (sounds, construction, words) in social interaction, and the effects of our choice upon others. The subject includes the cooperation in our speaking behavior and it thus involve using language to convey politeness, intimacy, playfulness, rudeness, awkwardness and a range of other social attributes. Theoretical concepts in pragmatics include: (a) participants (users of language in context); (b) speech acts (“locutionary act” which is an utterance with determinate sense and reference; “illocutionary act” which is the making of a statement, offer, promise, etc. in uttering a sentence by virtue of the conventional force associated with it; and “perlocutionary act” which is the bringing about of effects on the audience by means of uttering the sentence); (c) context (the relevant aspects of the physical or social setting of an utterance or discourse); (d) non-verbal communication (non-linguistic communication); (e) inference (the process of making logical conclusions from all that a particular context

provides to arrive at what a speaker means); (f) presupposition (facts that the participants of discourse take for granted in a particular context of communication); and (g) shared knowledge (common background information shared by the participants of discourse). Levinson (1983, p. 37) notes that “pragmatic principles of language usage can be shown systematically to “read into” utterances more than they conventionally or literally mean. This hope makes it clear that one of the reasons for the development of pragmatics (or interest in pragmatics) is the possibility that pragmatics can affect a radical simplification of semantics. Another reason for growing interest is growing realization that there is a very substantial gap between current linguistic theories of language and accounts of linguistic theories of language and accounts of linguistic communication.” For more insights on the definition of pragmatics, see Levinson (1983), Adegbija (1982), Adegbija (1999), Mey (2001), Grice (1975) and Searle (1969).

### 3. Semantics

Ogbulogo (2005) submits that the term “semantics” was first used by Breal in 1987 and it does not suggest that there had never been speculations about the nature of meaning.” A central goal of semantics is to examine as discrete entities, language properties and phenomena in the real world where language is used. According to Leech (1981, p. 319), “semantics is the level of linguistics which has been most affected by pragmatics, but the relation between semantics (in the sense of conceptual semantics) and pragmatics has remained a matter for fundamental disagreement. The central issue is: is it valid to separate pragmatics from semantics at all?” Charles W. Kreidler (1998, p. 3) submits that “semantics is the systematic study of meaning, and linguistic semantics is the study of how languages organize and express meanings.” Indeed, semantics is the study of meaning. Scholars contend that semantics begins from the stopping point of syntax and ends from where pragmatics begins. William O’ Grady and Archibald (2004, p. 174) posit that “the four major topics in semantics are: (i) the nature of meaning; (ii) some of the properties of the conceptual system underlying meaning; (iii) the computation of syntactic structure to the interpretation of sentences; and (iv) the role of non-grammatical factors in the understanding of utterances.”

### 4. Theoretical Framework

This paper hinges on Traugott’s Tendency of Semantic Change theory. Traugott (1989, pp. 34-5) proposes three major tendencies of semantic change: Tendency I (meanings based in the external described situation > meanings based in the internal evaluative/perceptual/cognitive described situation; Tendency II (meanings based in the external or internal described situation > meanings based in the textual and metalinguistic situation; Tendency III (meanings tend to become increasingly based in the speaker’s subjective belief state/attitudes towards the proposition. Given the fact that Traugott’s theory captures the linguistic, extralinguistic and figurative properties of meaning, it is a suitable theoretical anchorage for this study.

### 5. The Links between Pragmatics and Semantics

In this section of the paper, we investigate the links between pragmatics and semantics in terms of different perspectives:

#### (i) In terms of References/Referents

Charles Ogbulogo (2012, p. 9) posits that “reference relates to things, people and events in the world. It is the object or entity to which a linguistic expression relates. Thus, the referent of the word “boy” is a human being called boy. If meaning were restricted to reference, many words without obvious referent would be left out. It will be difficult to explain the meaning of prepositions, conjunctions and other grammatical units. Again, several linguistic expressions may relate to single referents. To avoid these limitations, semanticists use the word’s denotation and connotation to distinguish between meaning based on ostensiveness (that is, pointing) or reference and extension ...” In pragmatics, reference-making is informed by the semantics of word-classes. For example, demonstrative pronouns, deictic expressions and modal auxiliaries impinge on meaning in larger units of discourse. Levinson (ibid.) contends that “since demonstrative pronouns typically involve a gesture it seems easy to assimilate such acts of reference to general theories of action; if one can then show that other kinds of referring expressions are related to demonstratives, the case for viewing reference in general as species of action is sensible.” It remains true that the meaning of an expression in a given context is its pragmatic constraints. Consider (a) below in terms of how pragmatic motivation informs the proposition made about the referent:

#### a) The beast that she married has divorced her.

In (a), “beast” is a metaphorical representation of the brutal, cruel personality of the referent (husband) that is referred to as beast. The extralinguistic underpinnings (pragmatics) of (a) is the brutality that the husband subjected his wife to in the past. The link between pragmatics and semantics is obvious considering the fact that knowledge of the rules of a language facilitates deviation from convention-based language use (semantics) to principle-based language use (pragmatics). The social contexts of language use, is fundamental in the process of decoding the meaning of utterances. According to Labov (1972, p. 297), “no use of language can be divorced from its social context since special meaning is parasitic upon language.” Decoding the meaning of (a) (working out its topic-relevance) is essentially about cognition. This view aligns with Kempson (1986) who notes that pragmatics is “the study of the general cognitive principles involved in the retrieval of information from an utterance.”

#### (ii) In Terms of Extralinguistics

As fields of language study, pragmatics and semantics are concerned with extralinguistic use and interpretation of language. In semantics, there are different kinds of meaning. For example, the connotative meaning of an expression is its extralinguistic (contextual) meaning as in (b):

**b) There are many Aninis in the Nigerian Police Force.**

Lawrence Anini was a notorious armed robber in Edo State of Nigeria. Therefore, the message conveyed in (b) is clear: There are many criminal elements in the Nigerian Police Force. Pragmatic use of language gives social relevance to those phenomena that semantics name. This view corroborates Brumfit and Johnson (1979, p. 118) who posit that “the ability to compose sentences is not the ability we need to communicate. Communication only takes place when we make use of sentences to perform a variety of different acts of an essentially social nature. Thus we do not communicate by composing sentences, but by using sentences to make statements of different kinds ... to record, to classify, and so on, or to ask questions, make requests, give orders, etc. Knowing what is involved in putting sentences together correctly is only one part of what we mean by knowing a language, and it has very little value on its own. It has to be supplemented by knowledge of what sentences contain as in their normal use as a means of communication.” Pragmatics should be examined not just in terms of words in isolation, but also in terms of larger units of communication (sentences). Given the fact that a word contributes to the meaning of a sentence, there is undisputable links between pragmatics and semantics.

**(iii) In Terms of Sense**

Charles Ogbulogo (2012, p. 9) reports that “another interesting area of concern for semantics, is sense. Sense explains the system of linguistic relationships, which a lexical item contracts with others. If that relationship is paradigmatic, we have synonymy, antonymy, and so on. However, if the relationship is syntagmatic, we have collocation.” The sentence below captures the concept of sense in semantics:

- (i) **Representatives**, which commit the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition (paradigm cases: asserting, concluding, etc.);
- (ii) **Directives**, which are attempts by the speaker to get the addressee to do something (paradigm cases: requesting, questioning);
- (iii) **Commissives**, which commit the speaker to some future course of action (paradigm cases: promising, threatening, offering);
- (iv) **Expressives**, which express a psychological state (paradigm cases: thanking, apologizing, welcoming, congratulating);
- (v) **Declarations**, which effect immediate changes in the institutional state of affairs and which tend to rely on elaborate extra-linguistic institutions (paradigm cases: excommunicating, declaring war, christening, firing from employment).”

See Bach and Harnish (1979 for more insights on speech acts taxonomy).

**(iv) In Terms of the Nature of Language**

Language is the object of research in pragmatics and semantics. Both disciplines elucidate the intrinsic properties and extrinsic potentials of language in divergent ways. See Dada (2010) for tips about language.

**(v) In Terms of Inference-making**

In larger units of communication inferences are based on the denotative and connotative meanings of expressions. In pragmatics and semantics, inference-making is inevitable. To infer what *s* (speaker) means in a non-literal language, *h* (hearer) relies on “inferring whether or not the conventional meaning of an expression is used by *s* in a deviant way”. Consider (d):

(d) Policeman: Are we to eat your vehicle particulars? Give us kola or you remain here.  
Driver: Here is five thousand naira. Have it.

In (d), the driver shows his understanding of what the policeman means by the expression “kola”; it means “money”.

**(vi) In Terms of Philosophical Origin**

Levinson’s (ibid.) submission is instructive as far as the philosophical background of pragmatics is concerned:

The interest in pragmatics developed in part as a reaction or antidote to Chomsky’s treatment of language as an abstract device, or mental ability ... (an abstraction that Chomsky drew in part from the post-Bloomfieldian Structuralism that predominated immediately before transformational generative grammar). Generative semanticists looking for the means to undermine Chomsky’s position came out with philosophical thoughts devoted to the importance of the users of language to an understanding of its nature (works by Austin, Stranson, Grice and Searle in particular). To this day, most of the important concepts in pragmatics are drawn directly from philosophy of language.”

**The link between pragmatics and semantics is traceable not just to their philosophical origins, but also to their research concerns. Charles Ogbulogo (2012, p. 12) submits:**

Traditional semantics is associated with the works of such great philosophers as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle as

well as many others who came after them. Their focus was on the nature of human language itself. Based on their views of the nature of human language, these early philosophers were into two – the Naturalists and the Nuturists.

To the Naturalists, language was God-given such that there was hardly anything anybody could do to understand language. The Greek language was perceived to be the chosen language upon which all other languages should be based. Later, Latin became the focus of philosophical analysis.

The Nuturists on the other hand, viewed language as a social property common to a speech community. Language was therefore perceived to be man's creation for the convenience of communication. Thus, in spite of difference in language, the uniting point is that they are all for communication.

Traditional semantics was also concerned with the relationship between form and meaning. Following Carnap (1927), Firth (1957) and Ayer (1936), the meaning of a word is actually what it refers to. Ogden and Richards (1933) have also shared this view. There have also been later scholars – Grice, (1957) and Katz (1972) who believed that the image of a word takes shape in the speaker's or hearer's mind. Another major view of traditional semantics is that the meaning of a word can be decoded from its shape and sound. Words in this category are onomatopoeic. The major ideas in traditional semantics are reference, concepts, truth conditions, and so on."

The representational function of language enables it to operate as communication tool as evident in (e):

(e) These days people survive by engaging in 419.

In (e), "419" is an expression, and it is representative. The participants in a conversation in which the expression is used have shared knowledge about the societal phenomena it refers to. The background knowledge enables the communication to "flow". Using language to make references is logic-based because expressions have to be well formed (constructed) before they can refer even in context. Putting language units together for pragmatic communication is immersed in the selection and sequencing of speech acts; the social nature of speech acts makes this process inevitable. Speech acts are states-of-affairs. Savas L. Tsohatzidis (1994, p. 2) contends that "knowing what illocutionary act a speaker has performed in uttering a sentence of his language is essential for knowing what he meant in uttering that sentence; it is well known, however, that what speakers of a natural language mean by uttering sentences of that language is not always the same as what those sentences themselves mean; given, then, that speaker meanings and sentence meanings can diverge, why should the study of illocutionary acts, essential though they may be in understanding speaker meaning, be deemed a necessary component of the study of linguistic meaning?" Language scholars cannot study meaning without considering the dynamics and roles of speech acts in communication. This being the case, the link between pragmatics and semantics is real.

### **(vii) In Terms of Figurative Language**

The use of figurative expressions establishes the links between pragmatics and semantics. For example, pragmatic analysis of literary texts shows the instrumentality of metaphor in conveying writers' thematic preoccupations. Levinson (ibid.) opines that "there is a long and respectable tradition that views metaphor as a central semantic process and not a problem in pragmatics at all ... metaphors are special uses of linguistic expression where one "metaphorical" expression (or focus) is embedded in another "literal" expression (or frame) such that the meaning of focus interacts with and changes the meaning of the frame, and vice versa. To establish the need for a pragmatic approach to metaphor, we shall need to show, at some length, how such semantic approaches fail to yield adequate accounts of the phenomena. On such a semantic theory, the meanings of lexical items are specified by a set of features, each of which is an atomic concept or irreducible semantic prime drawn from a larger but restricted set, the members of the latter being in principle sufficient to jointly define all the complex senses of actually occurring lexical items."

## **6. Conclusion**

By investigating the links between pragmatics and semantics, this study examines speaker-meaning and linguistic meaning. James R. Hurford, Brendan Heasley and Michael B. Smith (2007) submit that "SPEAKER MEANING is what a speaker means (i.e. what he intends to convey) when he uses a piece of language. SENTENCE MEANING (or WORD MEANING) is what a sentence (or word) means, i.e. what it counts as the equivalent of in the language concerned. This paper establishes the links between pragmatics and semantics. Theoretical concepts in the literature of pragmatics (speech act, presupposition, inference, context, etc.) and semantics (sense, reference, deictic expressions, modal, deixis, denotation, connotation, etc.) give the study direction and sound theoretical base. Conclusively, the links between pragmatics and semantics are fundamentally about the nature and functions of language.

## REFERENCES

1. Adegbija, E. F. (ed.) (1999). *The English Language and Literature in English: An Introductory Handbook*. Ilorin: University of Ilorin.
2. Bach, K. & Harnish, R.(1979). *Linguistic Communication and Speech Acts*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. The MIT Press.
3. Brumfit, C. J. & Johnson, K. (1979). *The Communicative Approach to Language Teaching*.Oxford: Oxford University Press.
4. Charles, O. (2012). *ENG 331: Introduction to Semantics*. National Open University of Nigeria.
5. Crystal, D. & Valey, R. (1993). *Introduction to Languages*. London: Whurr Publishers.
6. Dada, S. A. (2010). *Language Policies and Planning in Nigeria: Issues and Perspectives*. JESAN, 13(2), 417-440.
7. Dittmar, N. (1976). *Sociolinguistics: A Critical Survey of Theory and Application*. Edward Arnold.
8. *Encyclopedia Americana* vol. 22. (1994). (p. 514). New York: Americana Group Ltd.
9. Grice, H. P. (1975). *Logic and Conversation*. In Cole and Morgan. (eds.)
10. Kempson, R. (1977). *Semantic Theory*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
11. Kreidler, C. W. (1998). *Introducing English Semantics*. London: Routledge.
12. Labov, W. (1972). *The Study of Language in Its Social Context* (pp. 283-307). In P. P. Giglioli (Ed.), *Harmondsworth: Penguin*.
13. Leech, G. & Short, M. H. (1981). *Style in Fiction: An Introduction to English Fictional Prose* (p.3). London: Longman Group Limited.
14. Levinson S. (1983). *Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
15. Mey, J. (2001). *An Introduction to Pragmatics*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
16. Ogidi-Andrew, Chrisiana. (2018). *Deixis*. In O. Ibileye (Ed.), *Discourse Analysis and Pragmatics: Issues in Theory and Practice*. Lagos: Malthouse Press Limited.
17. Savas, L. T. (1994). *Ways of Doing Things with Words: An Introduction*. In L. T. Savas (Ed.), *Foundations of Speech Acts Theory: Philosophical and Linguistic perspectives*. London: Routledge.
18. Searle, J. (1969). *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
19. Traugott, E. C. (1989). *On the Rise of Epistemic Meanings in English: An Example of Subjectification in Semantic Change*. *Language*, 65(1), 31-55.
20. William, O' Grady & John Archibald (Eds.)(2004). *Contemporary Linguistic Analysis:An Introduction* (Fifth Edition). Canada: Pearson Education Inc.

### CITE AS

Olaleye J. I., & Acheoah J. E. (2023). *The Links between Pragmatics and Semantics*. *Global Journal of Research in Humanities & Cultural Studies*, 3(4), 13–17. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8253470>