

**Semantics and Pragmatics:**  
**Differences from the lenses of Cognitive Semantics**

Abu Shahid

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## Semantics and Pragmatics

Semantics is the study of the meaning of words, phrases, and sentences. It tries to establish relationships between words and the concepts they represent, and it tries to understand the use of language by speakers to convey meaning. Pragmatics, on the other hand, is the study of meaning in context. It focuses on the speakers and how they use context and background knowledge to interpret the meaning of words and sentences. But why even study it in the first place? While it's true that individuals can function in society without explicitly studying semantics and pragmatics, intentional study offers advantages in terms of depth, efficiency, awareness, and personal and professional development. So what is the difference between the two?

The difference between semantics and pragmatics can be thought of as the difference between what is said and what is meant <sup>1</sup> For example, the phrase "I'm cold" is a statement of the subjective experience of the speaker. However, in the right context, it could be a request to turn the fan off. It all boils down to sense and reference.

Distinguishing between sense and reference helps explain how language connects to reality. Sense denotes the intrinsic meaning or conceptual essence of a word or phrase, irrespective of its real-world connections. Conversely, reference pertains to how an expression is perceived and linked to other linguistic elements by speakers, influencing its relationship with the world. And very beautifully and as expected, when we talk we rarely notice this subtle difference. Our language archive is made up of these blocks of sense which we use to refer to things that are abstract, new and unknown. And we juggle between the two indiscriminately. Hence, it makes sense that in cognitive semantics there is no stark difference between the two. They are the two ends of spectrum

Does that mean that there is a difference between the two and that there is no difference at all? Yes and yes. <sup>2</sup> Without making this topic about something else entirely; consider this statement: "This sentence is false" . If the sentence is true, then it must be false, but if it is false, then it must be true.

In everyday conversation, we barely pay heed to these nuances. It all boils down to cooperation and comprehension. When two people speak, we can presuppose that they want to cooperate in exchanging meaning with each other. This gets regulated using Maxims of conversation. The first maxim is

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1. actually it is much deeper than that but we will see it later.

2. such a statement is called antinomy. Antinomy is a concept that refers to a self-contradictory statement or a situation where two logical conclusions contradict each other

the maxim of quality, which means basically to tell the truth. Next maxim is maxim of quantity. According to which messages should be as economical as possible, that means explain the world with as few words as possible without hampering on the delivery of meaning. The third maxim is concerned with relevance; which states that one should always reply properly and contextually to a speaker. The last maxim is the manner maxim, which states that one should give information in a clear and orderly way without causing confusion. The idea is that following the maxims in conversation is natural; and violating the maxims is often understood as intentional and meaningful. The listener is then required to infer the speaker's intended meaning by drawing on background knowledge and context. This background knowledge can be cultural or embodied experience. This violation of maxims is not for sounding poetic or for jesting but for actual practical uses.

For example, lying can easily be understood as violation of maxim of quality and yet we lie all the time for not so poetic reasons.

And whenever one of the maxims of cooperation are violated; one relies on pragmatics to infer meaning. Also what I feel is that this push and shove between semantics and pragmatics is not just limited to spoken language but goes much deeper than that. We see them in memes and public secrets. Also consider how the meaning of a spoken phrase changes with the change in background music. Or consider how the facial expressions of a speaker determine much of the meaning of what a person is saying. And while most of this essay kept emphasising on the difference between semantics and pragmatics; this is where I can claim that there is no difference between them as there is no purely semantical exchange in conversation <sup>3</sup> “Their cake tastes terrible” can mean literally anything.

The reason why I feel is so is because language is not fixed and it evolves. I would like to use the example of this very recent gen-Z word mid which Urban Dictionary defines as “When the word mid is used it is used to describe something that is not good but not bad in the middle, hence the name Mid.”. So when a party was not bad, nor good, you can simply call it mid. However, the word has more negative connotations than positive connotations. So the word mid started replacing other words to sound less hurting and more polite. “The movie was mid; I will not recommend it to you.”. Is not this some sort of inflation where decent things (read: mid) are now bad simply by the use of the word ‘mid’? So in the end, what does the word mid mean? Does it mean ‘hey-the-stuff-was-bad-but-i-am-being-polite’ or does it mean ‘it-is-mediocre’? Here, literal meaning of the word has little relevance. Also consider words like ‘woke’ or ‘liberal’; with seemingly innocent meanings.

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3. ; except maybe in the case of factual statements like “Sun rises in the East”, “Cat is a mammal”, etc. Or is it so? What about the former claim coming from a flat-Earther?

And yet, these words are more often used as slangs everyday.

Also consider the use of words like ‘pro-life’. Here, the name was given to the people who are against abortion (and against pro-choice) by themselves. So we are basically using the language of adversary. And when we start doing that, we have already diluted our stance in the debate. Because are not supporters of pro-choice pro-life too? It is just that they are in favour of saving mother’s life more than the foetus’ life. And while pro-life people carry the sentiment of being bigots (anti-choice); pro-choice people are name-called murderers because they are not linguistically speaking ”anti-life”, which is far from truth. So not only does it matter what words you use but also whose words you use. <sup>4</sup> <sup>5</sup> So understanding the distinction between semantics and pragmatics like this erases the distinction between the two. Because the context given may be something that is very informative for someone but obvious for someone else.

And what even are words if not empty signifiers? The word apple has no apple-ness in it. And yet, for English speakers, it is a shared obvious context which is used in their metaphors and daily spoken language and idioms which come so naturally to them. However, a non-native speaker may take time to wrap their heads around these references. <sup>6</sup>.

In conclusion: Does that mean that there is a difference between the two and that there is no difference at all? Yes and yes

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4. terrorist to one is revolutionary to someone else; it is just that certain words have undue weightage/favour due to hegemony/state

5. use of language of adversary to air your thoughts is called semantic infiltration

6. this happens all the times even though a lot of languages have words coming from a common shared root language