

DELIMITING SEMANTICS AND PRAGMATICS. A FUNCTIONAL, STRUCTURAL CRITERION



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The present paper is an attempt to demarcate the fields of Semantics and Pragmatics. The traditional problem of intrusion of Semantics upon the field of Pragmatics may be a consequence of the conception of Semantics as the study of *designation*. This relation between a linguistic sign and an extralinguistic entity involves a connection with contextual parameters typical of the domain of Pragmatics. As a solution to this problem, the present proposal is to define Semantics on a functional, structural criterion. This entails conceiving Semantics within the domain of the representative function of language, being the systematic study of *signification* its only object of study. This definition, then, favours a view of Pragmatics as the study pertaining to the domain of the expressive-appellative function of language, and focusing on meaning as conveyed in a communicative situation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Delimitation of scientific fields of study is based on three major factors: subject matter, methodology and purpose. Variation in the subject matter is an unquestionable proof that a change of discipline is operating. It usually entails a change in methodology and in purpose. By contrast, the opposite does not always hold: a methodological change may only be indicative of different approaches towards the same object of study. Consequently, a change of discipline does not necessarily occur.

This being so, delimitation of the fields of Semantics and Pragmatics should virtually pose no problems if based exclusively on their respective objects of study. However, due to the indeterminacy of their objects of study, the problem does exist.

An overview of the literature shows that the demarcation of each of the disciplines under consideration has concentrated on the traditional division between the two fields. Applying a strict criterion, Semantics has been viewed as the science concerned only with truth conditions, or semantic content; that is, with propositions that communicate information about the world (cfr. Lewis 1972). Pragmatics, for its part, has been conceived as the study of meaning minus truth conditions (cfr. Gazdar 1979). The latter definition is based on Grice's (1975) argument that utterances, by means of the *Cooperative Principle* (CP), convey more information than they apparently express, and that the hearer arrives at that extra information by means of assumptions once any of the *maxims* of conversation is violated by the speaker.

In view of such a delimitation, immediately comes to mind the problem of how to deal with phenomena such as anaphora, speech act or presupposition, just to mention a few. As a way of overcoming the limitations of this strict Semantics/Pragmatics dichotomy, Lecch (1974; 1983) basically distinguished three positions known as *semanticism*, *pragmaticism* and *complementarism*. Semanticism and pragmaticism result from an attempt on the part of semanticists and pragmaticians to incorporate into their fields aspects of study which in a strict sense fall, respectively, under the domain of Pragmatics and Semantics. On the one hand, phenomena such as anaphora and presuppositions, i.e. assumptions which guide

users' understanding of language, could only be accounted for by semanticists by means of incorporating a pragmatic perspective to their field¹. Ironically, semanticists who were traditionally only interested in form were now rescuing phenomena related to content which had earlier been thrown into the waste-basket of Pragmatics. This solution was adopted by generative semanticists, particularly in their argument for the *performative hypothesis* (Ross 1970), according to which in its deep structure every sentence is a performative. Thus, Pragmatics came to be subsumed under Semantics. The opposite stance -Semantics subsumed under Pragmatics- was held by philosophers, such as Wittgenstein (1953), Austin (1962), and Searle (1969), who conceived the study of meaning primarily under the paradigm of a speech act theory, for pragmaticians are more interested in why language users say something than whether what they say is true or false.

Finally, the complementarist solution pioneered by Leech (1974; 1983) considers Pragmatics and Semantics two complementary and interrelated fields of study. This 'pragmatic eclecticism' (Mey 1993, 45) prevents unfortunate indulging into the strict borderlines of either field, all the more as "pragmatics [is] apparently ... in a steady evolutionary flux and boundary markers, once placed, will have to be moved constantly anyway" (Mey 1993, 43; brackets are mine).

The aim of the present paper is to show that a conception of Semantics as the study of *signification* (Coseriu 1970), and not of *designation*, may help to solve the alledged difficulty scholars, such as Leech (1974; 1983) or Mey (1993), appear to encounter in their attempts to set boundary markers between Pragmatics and Semantics. In order then to arrive at the position Semantics and Pragmatics occupy in relation to each other, I will argue in favour of a conception of Semantics as a functional and structural investigation. For this purpose, it is necessary to start by determining the object of study of Semantics. This is synonymous to making a distinction between what is and is not systematic, structural, and oppositive. Another preliminary step that has to be taken is to decide what aspects of meaning are the result of the knowledge and opinions one has about extralinguistic entities, and what aspects of meaning are properly linguistic; in other words, it is important to distinguish between *designation* and *signification* (Coseriu 1970).

2. DEFINING STRUCTURAL SEMANTICS

Semantics became a scientific field of study when, after its liberation from mentalism, its investigation came to be based on the observation of the relations between signs and extralinguistic reality, with the aim of making statements about the communicative function of language. A structural perspective on the study of Semantics was first introduced by Ogden & Richards (1923) and Trier (1931) with their works on lexical fields, but the real rise of structural Semantics was not dated until 1960. Coseriu (1964a; 1964b) was one of its most representative advocates.

Structural Semantics is concerned with the functional study of the lexicon. Traditional Lexicology, and Semantics in particular, has never been structural, that is, based on functional oppositions. There are three main reasons that, according to Coseriu (1964a, 19ff), justify that situation:

(1) the frequent identification of linguistic meaning or content (*significatum*) with extralinguistic reality (*designata*), which is the result of the traditional non-dis-

¹ As an exception, there are a few cases in which semanticists can explain presuppositions without the aid of a pragmatic account. For example, the lexical items *back* and *again* carry inherently the presuppositions of going to where one has previously been and repetition of the same action, respectively.

inction between word and object¹. But meaning, understood in its classical, Saussurean sense of 'notion', 'idea', or 'concept', is arbitrary (i.e. not imposed by objective reality), although at times it MAY coincide with extralinguistic reality;

- (2) the fact of considering the link between expression and content a lexicological phenomenon; indeed, the same terms are used to refer both to the expression and to the content. Being content synonymous to extralinguistic reality, Lexicology and Semantics include within their domain the study of extralinguistic reference. As a consequence, and by extension, their domain erroneously includes the uses that a certain word or lexeme may acquire in different situations. And
- (3) the real or imaginary difference between the lexicon and both Grammar and Phonology. Unlike Grammar and Phonology, the lexicon is thought to lack simple lexical structurings. It is also considered to be highly irregular and little structured. And above all, traditional linguists doubt of the possibility of a complete systematic description of the entire lexicon of a language.

Coseriu (1964a) clearly demonstrates that lexical units can be analyzed within a structural framework. Like phonological and grammatical structures, lexical structures also satisfy the conditions required by the three definitions of the notion of *structure*. Coseriu (ibid., 28ff) defines structure as:

- (1) the delimitation and organization of *substance* (in Hjelmslev's (1943) sense) by means of functional units which are different in different languages;
- (2) the existence of distinctive oppositions; that is, the units, which have partly similar and partly different features, are organized into groups, and function by virtue of their distinctive features as oppositive members within these groups;
- (3) the functional units are completely analyzable into distinctive features.

The difference between structural Semantics and Grammar or Phonology is the fact that structural Semantics has to describe a higher number of systems, which correspond to the number of *functional languages* (Coseriu 1964a). A functional language is a discourse technique that is homogeneous from a temporal, spatial, socio-cultural and individual perspective (Coseriu 1964b, 119). Despite the diversity of systems, however, it is possible to describe a 'common lexical core' which contains a sufficient number of oppositions common to all functional languages. This 'common lexical core' would correspond to what Coseriu (ibid., 38) calls *common language*.

As far as the lack of simple and precise lexical structures is concerned, this argument cannot count as an impediment to structural Semantics since Phonology and Grammar also contain exceptions and deviations to well-established structures. Moreover, without the prior proof of a rigorous method, it is illegitimate to argue that lexical structures are imprecise.

A further impediment that has been attributed to structural Semantics is the high degree of subjectivity with which experience is described. This, again, is no more than a consequence of the non-distinction between *designatum* and *designata*. Subjectivity is a feature that affects only the way in which extralinguistic reality is perceived. Linguistic meaning, by contrast, is a conceptual value determined by functional oppositions, and therefore independent of the perceiver.

¹ This non-distinction is precisely what happens in the Natural Sciences, where words are used as mere substitutes for objects. Scientific and technical terminologies are exact delimitations of objective reality.

The issue of subjectivity raises a further potential problem: namely, the allegedly different organization of lexical relations in different individuals of the same linguistic community. As Coseriu argues (1964b, 103), this is not a problem of the internal structure of the lexicon, but of the nature of things and of the particular sensibility and opinion with which each individual perceives reality. In other words, it is an issue pertaining to the realm of *designation*.

At this stage of the explanation, it is necessary to introduce the distinction between relations of *signification* and relations of *designation* (Coseriu, 1964a, 44; 1964b, 130-1; 1970, 187-209). The former are relations between the contents (i.e. meaning in the strict sense of the word) of linguistic signs; the latter are relations between whole linguistic signs and the objects of the real world to which they refer and represent. The main characteristics that differentiate these two types of relations are the following:

- (1) Only relations of signification can be structured.
- (2) Signification belongs to *la langue*, whereas designation belongs to *discours* or speech.
- (3) Whereas relations of signification are constant (from a synchronic point of view), relations of designation are variable.
- (4) Only designation can be metaphorical from a synchronic point of view; in other words, an object can occasionally be referred to by signs that do not correspond to any of the classes to which the object belongs.

This distinction is essential for structural Semantics since only contents are properly linguistic and can be structured. Contents are semantic features which are common to all situations and languages in which they are used. They are much more general than the *acceptations des mots* (i.e. the “discourse-meanings or lexical variants which may be of a contextual or situational nature” (Coseriu & Geckeler 1981, 53)) that occur in speech. Consequently, it is only signification or linguistic meaning that constitutes the object of structural Semantics. Designation, by contrast, depends on extralinguistic reality. It includes not only the universal knowledge that individuals have about real objects and state of affairs, but also opinions and traditional beliefs concerning such objects and state of affairs. Due to this universality of knowledge, and to its influence on the *acceptations* that linguistic units acquire in certain situations or contexts, it is, at times, very difficult to distinguish designation from properly linguistic meaning¹.

Nevertheless, although designation is related to independence from linguistic meaning and to lack of systematicity, it plays an important role in discourse activity. As discourse is ABOUT the world, it is often knowledge about extralinguistic reality, and not only language, that justifies the appearance and interpretation of lexical items. On the one hand, designation serves to discriminate and interpret polyvalent lexical units from the point of view of the language system. Polyvalency is a problem that goes beyond the language system and that can only be solved if placed within the domain of the real world. Thus, it is frequently designation that fixes the meaning of compound lexical items: the interpretation of the combination of objects referred to by the components that integrate a compound depends on the way these objects work in real life. For example, a *waterbed* is a waterproof mattress filled with water. But, contrarily to what one might have expected from the perspective of the elements of the compound, a *water biscuit* is not a biscuit filled with

¹ Traditional Semantics made no distinction between signification and designation. Thus, analyses of extensions and restrictions of meaning were made in relation to certain expressions, but never in relation to linguistic meaning proper. All attempts to describe meaning was no more than a study of designation.

water, because there is no such a product on the market. A water biscuit is a thin, crisp biscuit which is not sweet and which is usually eaten with butter and cheese.

On the other hand, designation is the responsible for those linguistic expressions that are not uttered because they are considered to be superfluous. Again, it is the individual's universal knowledge of the real world that determines what is commonly presupposed with regard to the objects referred to. Only new information is usually produced. This does not mean that what is communicatively impossible (i.e. that which is not expressed) might not be linguistically possible. For example, although *(I have) a house with windows* is linguistically possible, it is communicatively unacceptable because it contains only old information about houses. Conversely, *(I have) a house with only two windows* is communicatively possible because it contains new information, namely, that unlike common houses, which have several windows, this one has only two.

Summarizing, meaning has to be studied within the combined framework of lexical fields and functional oppositions. In order to identify a lexical unit, it is necessary first to describe its distinctive features in order to establish then the oppositions of content in which it functions. The discipline that studies the systematic description of lexical structures of content is Semantics. It is concerned only with signification, which is a linguistic phenomenon independent of the *acceptations* that the lexical unit may acquire in different contexts or situations. To put it in other words, Semantics studies the *content purport* (Hjelmslev 1943), that is, a common core of content features that all languages use to represent reality. The systematic description focuses only on indispensable features, not on those features that could be important to determine the meaning in a specific context or situation. These latter features belong to designation, which encompasses aspects of meaning that are unsystematic. Disciplines describing these aspects (eg. Pragmatics) work within the field of speech -or *la parole*.

Now that the object of study of Semantics has been established, we shall determine the place that Semantics occupies in relation to Pragmatics. For this purpose, it is useful to resort to Bühler's (1934) classification of linguistic functions into *representative*, *expressive* and *appellative*, and to the two levels of language proposed by Saussure (1916): the expression-level (*signifiant*) and the content-level (*signifié*). The intersection of the representative function with the content-level corresponds to the semantic discipline. Semantics describes the *form* of content (in Hjelmslev's (1943) sense)¹. This form comprises a lexical component (i.e. the meaning contained in lexemes) and a grammatical component (i.e. the notions of plurality, singularity, present, indicative, genitive, etc.). They constitute the object of study of, respectively, lexical Semantics -or Lexicology- and grammatical Semantics.

3. DELIMITING PRAGMATICS

To determine the position of Pragmatics, we shall refer to disciplines concerned with Bühler's (1934) expressive and appellative functions, which investigate language in social contexts and settings. Broadly speaking, the expressive and appellative functions do no longer correspond to a systematically and structurally defined meaning of language. Rather, these functions belong to the *norm*, as it encompasses everything that, without being necessarily functional in discourse, has been socially fixed and corresponds to language as a 'social institution' (Coseriu 1964b, 126). And, the expressive and appellative functions

¹ It is important to clarify that the focus of Semantics as understood here corresponds to *form* according to Coseriu's realistic perspective, but to *substance* in Hjelmslev's formalist viewpoint (cfr. Hjelmslev 1957).

provide values that a certain word acquires in particular contexts or situations. The accuracy of this dichotomous distinction of linguistic functions (representative versus both expressive and appellative), and its applicability to a functional description of the language has been clearly shown in the use that numerous scholars have made of it. Troubetzkoy (1939), just to mention one of the most outstanding examples, adopted Bühler's functions in order to differentiate between *representative Phonology* and *phonological Stylistics*. Further examples -at times introducing different shades to this dichotomy- are Danes (1964) and Dik (1978).

Despite their similar field of study -the expressive-appellative function of language-, the different perspectives from which language in use is approached allows the following sub-classification of disciplines:

- (a) Disciplines whose primary object is the study of linguistic resources influenced by contextual factors. Their interest falls on the linguistic resource rather than on the contextual parameters. Such is the case of the study of thematic and informative functions, and of cohesion.
- (b) Disciplines who concentrate on the behaviour and attitude of interlocutors engaged in communication. This behaviour happens to be revealed primarily through the use of language. The focus falls on the interactive behaviour, context and setting rather than on language. To this group does Pragmatics belong.

In view of the explanation in section 2, it is imperative to conceive Semantics in a narrow sense, i.e., as structural Semantics, in order to clearly fix its limits as against Pragmatics. This conception of Semantics favours a definition of Pragmatics as the field investigating both how contextual features are encoded in language, and how extra meaning -in a broad sense- is conveyed through those principles of language use and understanding (eg. conversational implicatures, illocutionary force, presuppositions) which are not encoded in utterances¹. This definition entails a theory of the user and of the importance of the nature of context, two key components of any communicative theory. Pragmatics is thus defined not only from a user-oriented but also from a grammatical perspective.

As the notion of context is also a key component of other disciplines (eg. Anthropological Linguistics, Sociolinguistics, Social Psychology), it is of utmost importance to specify its scope in order to avoid further errors of delimitation². Within the domain of Pragmatics, human language uses are determined by the context created in communicative interaction (*social context* in Mey's (1993) terminology), that is, in "the sustained production of chains of mutually-dependent acts, constructed by two or more agents each monitoring and building on the actions of the other..." (Levinson 1983, 44).

As far as the 'component/perspective' dichotomy is concerned (cfr. Mey 1993), it goes without saying that Pragmatics is here conceived as a 'component' of the language system on a par with Phonology, Syntax, Semantics, Sociolinguistics, Psycholinguistics, etc. Its specific object of study and fixed boundaries wins it the status of a discipline in its own right. It should be noted, however, that the component view does not contradict the fact

¹ Cfr. Levinson (1983) for a detailed explanation of the limitations of different definitions of Pragmatics.

² An example of blurred borderlines constitutes Mey's (1993) broad definition of Pragmatics based on the context of society or *societal context*, i.e. on society's institutions. His view of Pragmatics as "the study of the conditions of human language uses as these are determined by the context of society" (Mey, 1993, 42) is an instance of this field encroaching upon the domain of Sociolinguistics. Consequently, here Pragmatics can be considered to hold the status of a multi discipline.

that other disciplines may at a certain point adopt an interactive perspective towards the analysis of their objects of study.

In order to further delineate the nature of Pragmatics, it is worth distinguishing between two perspectives: *Universal Pragmatics* and *Empirical Pragmatics*. The former is a general study comprising two levels: (a) the general conditions framing communication and linguistic performance. This level includes *essential universals* (Cosieriu 1972), such as the idea of speech as action, the dialogic structure of production and understanding, the elements integrating a speech situation (eg. interlocutors, time, space, intention of speaker, background knowledge, etc.), or deixis understood in a general sense. That is, universals which necessarily belong to the notion of language. And (b) *empirical universals* (ibid.) or language universals which can empirically be observed to occur as a general rule. To level (a) pertains Mey's (1993) *Metapragmatics* and Leech's (1983) *General Pragmatics*.

And as far as *Empirical Pragmatics*¹ is concerned, this area focuses on the systematic description and interpretation of linguistic interaction ranging from isolated speech acts (eg. illocutionary acts, perlocutionary acts, indirect speech acts) to complex communicative situations, and these always in relation to individual languages, societies or cultures².

4. CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper has been twofold. First, to determine the reason for the traditional failure to fix clear borderlines between Semantics and Pragmatics; and second, to give a solution to the problem of delimitation by reverting to a functional and structural definition of Semantics that might allow a clear separation between both disciplines.

It has been suggested that the reason for blurring the borderlines between Semantics and Pragmatics may lie in the traditional conception of Semantics as the study of designation; in other words, in the view that the semantic discipline is concerned with the study of relations between whole linguistic signs and the objects of the real world to which they refer and represent. The fact that these relations entail dependence on extralinguistic reality inevitably leads to connecting with contextual parameters, which, in turn, are key components of a pragmatic investigation.

If, however, Semantics is delimited as a functional and structural investigation of the content of linguistic signs, that is, as the systematic description of only indispensable content features common to all languages to represent reality, then there would be no necessity or possibility of intruding upon the field of Pragmatics, and therefore on the domain of unsystematic aspects of meaning typical of context-dependent parameters which are common to designation. Thus, Semantics understood as structural Semantics pertains to the domain of the representative function of language and has linguistic meaning or signification as its only object of study. Consequently, the possibility of blurring the borderlines between Semantics and Pragmatics is virtually eliminated. It is therefore only with disciplines dealing with the system (eg. Phonetics, Phonology, Morphology, Syntax) that the borderlines of Semantics might, if ever, be confused, but never with Pragmatics which belongs to the domain of language in use, and more specifically, to the communicative

¹ Mey's (1993) *Micro-/Macropragmatics* division cuts, to some extent, across our *Empirical Pragmatics*. It is not so much the nature of the study -general vs. specific- as the units of analysis that justify his division, namely, isolated utterances or sentences, and speech acts for *Micropragmatics*, and larger units of language use like conversations for *Macropragmatics*.

² To differentiate a detailed language-specific study from a culture-specific one, Leech (1983) proposes the terms *Pragmalinguistics* and *Socio-Pragmatics*, respectively. The former is more related to Grammar, whereas the latter is closer to Sociology (eg. most of Conversation Analysis work).

behaviour displayed by interactants in a speech situation. Moreover, the meaning that may be transmitted in a communicative situation is never of a systematic, structural and opposite nature as is proper linguistic meaning.

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