

Introduction to Linguistics (CL1.102)

Summer 2021, IIIT Hyderabad

Course Topics

- Semantics
- Pragmatics
- Discourse

Introduction

Speakers of a language have different types of tacit linguistic knowledge – phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic.

Two sentences could mean the same thing (synonymy):

- In the room women come and go.
- Women come and go in the room.

or opposite things (contradiction):

- Rahul Gandhi is the PM of India.
- Rahul Gandhi is not the PM of India.

or one could imply the other:

- Covid killed millions of people all over the world.
- Millions of people died. A single sentence could have more than one meaning (ambiguity): “I am positive.”

Motivation

The study of semantics is central to the study of communication and of the human mind and cognition. It is the meeting point of disciplines like psychology, linguistics and philosophy.

History

Semantics was “disconnected” from linguistics in the mid-20th century.

Tesnière and Chomsky asserted that syntax was autonomous and to be independently studied (“Colourless green ideas sleep furiously.”).

Tesnière predated Chomsky, but is not cited by him – he said meaning is independent, while Chomsky declared it irrelevant. Tesnière’s work anticipated dependency grammar.

Lakoff (and Chomsky in his later works), on the other hand, kept semantics integral to his work.