



SEMANTICS



Quick review

- Necessary/contingent
- A priori/a posteriori
- Analytic/synthetic
- Presupposition
 - Semantic (truth-based)
 - Pragmatic (speaker-based)



Today

- Presupposition continued
 - Context
 - Pragmatic theories
- Sentential semantics

Presupposition and context

- One problem for a simple truth-based account of presupposition is that often the presuppositional behavior seems sensitive to **context**.
- While a given sentence always produces the same set of entailments, it seems that this is not true of presuppositions.
- *It was Harry who Alice loved.*
- *It was Alice who loved Harry.*
- Both sentences express the same proposition (they seem to say the same thing)
- The difference is that they belong to different conversational contexts: whether the participants have been discussing Harry or Alice.

Presupposition and context

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- While a given sentence always produces the same set of entailments, it seems that this is not true of presuppositions.
- *It was Harry who Alice loved.* presupposes Alice loved someone
- *It was Alice who loved Harry.* presupposes Someone loved Harry
- Both sentences express the same proposition (they seem to say the same thing)
- The difference is that they belong to different conversational contexts: whether the participants have been discussing Harry or Alice.

Presupposition and context

- Another contextual feature is traditionally called the **projection problem** when the presupposition produced by a simple clause does not survive when the clause is incorporated into a complex sentence.
- *1. John will regret doing linguistics.*
- *2. If John does linguistics, he'll regret it.*
- 1 presupposes that John is doing/will do linguistics.
- 2 doesn't presuppose that John is doing/will do linguistics.

Pragmatic theories of presupposition

- Some writers (for example Leech 1981) have divided presuppositions into two types: one, **semantic presupposition**, amenable to a truth-relations approach another, **pragmatic presupposition**, which requires an interactional description.

Pragmatic theories of presupposition

- In contrast, Stalnaker (1974) argued that presupposition is essentially a pragmatic phenomenon: part of the set of assumptions made by participants in a conversation, which he termed the **common ground**.
- For example, cases of presuppositional failure like *The king of France is bald* would be explained in terms of the speaker assuming something (*There is a king of France*) that is not in the common ground.

Pragmatic theories of presupposition

- A pragmatic theory of presupposition is also proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1995) who argue that presupposition is not an independent phenomenon but one of a series of effects produced when the speaker employs syntactic structure and intonation to show the hearer how the current sentence fits into the previous background.
- They propose that the same principle of relevance to contextual assumptions covers both presupposition and the choice of the different word orders and intonations in below:
 - a. It rained on MONDAY.
 - b. On Monday it RAINED.
 - c. On MONDAY it rained.
- The preceding context will naturally lead a speaker to choose one of the sentences above over another.

Sentential Semantics

- Some aspects of meaning belong to the level of the sentence.


Sentential Semantics

- We can identify three important dimensions: **situation type**, **tense**, and **aspect**.

Sentential Semantics

- **Situation type** is a label for the typology of situations encoded in the semantics of a language.

- *Robert loves pizza.*
 - *Mary knows the way to San Jose.*
- 
- Describe a static state

- *Robert grew very quickly.*
 - *Mary is driving to San Jose.*
- 
- Describe a dynamic state

Sentential Semantics

- Another aspect is **tense**.

- a. Tā xiànzài yǒu kè
he now have classes
“He now has classes.”
- b. Tā zuótiān yǒu kè
he yesterday have classes
“He had classes yesterday.”
- c. Tā míngtiān yǒu kè
he tomorrow have classes
“He will have classes tomorrow.”

- Here the verb *you* does not change form: the time reference is given by
- the time words (*xianzai*, *zuotian* and *m'ingtian*)
- Compare this with the English translations where the verb *have* changes for tense to give the forms, *have*, *had*, and *will have*.

Sentential Semantics

- The key point is that the location in time identified by tense belongs not to a single word but to the whole sentence.
- Hannibal and his armies brought elephants across the Alps.
- Though it is the verb *bring* which carries the morphological marker of tense, it seems sensible to say that the whole event described belongs in the past.

Sentential Semantics

- **Aspect** is also a grammatical system relating to time, but here the speaker may choose how to describe the internal temporal nature of a situation.
- 1. David wrote a crime novel.
- 2. David was writing a crime novel.
- If the situation is in the past, for example, does the speaker portray it as a closed completed event, as in 1, or as an ongoing process, perhaps unfinished, as in 2?

Sentential Semantics

- **Stative vs Dynamic verbs**

- 1 Mary loved to drive sports cars.
- We do not know from 1 if or how the state ended: whether Mary's tastes changed, or she herself is no longer around. All we are told is that the relationship described between Mary and sports cars existed for a while.
- We can contrast this with a sentence like 2 below, containing a dynamic verb like *learn*:
- 2 Mary learned to drive sports cars.
- Here the speaker is describing a process and focusing on the end point: at the beginning Mary didn't know how to drive sports cars.

Sentential Semantics

- **Dynamic** verbs can be classified into a number of types, based on the semantic distinctions **durative/punctual** and **telic/atelic**
- **durative** is applied to verbs that describe a situation or process which lasts for a period of time, e.g. slept in
 - *John slept*
- while **punctual** describes an event that seems so instantaneous that it involves virtually no time, e.g. cough in
 - *John coughed*

Sentential Semantics

- **Telic** refers to those processes that are seen as having a natural completion. Compare for example:
 - a. *Harry was building a raft.* (telic)
 - b. *Harry was gazing at the sea.* (atelic)

It doesn't follow from a that Harry built a raft

But it does follow from b that Harry gazed at the sea

FYI: 'telic' is also known as **bounded**; 'atelic' is known as **unbounded**

Sentential Semantics

- **A system of situation types**
- The task for the semanticist is to show how the inherent semantic distinctions carried by verbs, and verb phrases, map into a system of situation types.
- One influential attempt to do this is Vendler (1967). Below are the four kinds of situations he identified, together with some English verbs and verb phrases exemplifying each type
 - a. States
desire, want, love, hate, know, believe
 - b. Activities (unbounded processes)
run, walk, swim, push a cart, drive a car
 - c. Accomplishments (bounded processes)
run a mile, draw a circle, walk to school, paint a picture, grow up, deliver a sermon, recover from illness
 - d. Achievements (point events)
recognize, find, stop, start, reach the top, win the race, spot someone

Sentential Semantics

- Smith (1991), building on Vendler's system, adds the situation type **semelfactive**, distinguishing it from achievements as follows:
 - *Semelfactives* are instantaneous atelic events, for example [knock], [cough]. *Achievements* are instantaneous changes of states, with an outcome of a new state, for example [reach the top], [win a race]. (Smith 1991: 28)

Sentential Semantics

- She identifies three semantic categories or features: [stative], [telic], and [duration], and uses these to classify five situation types, as follows:

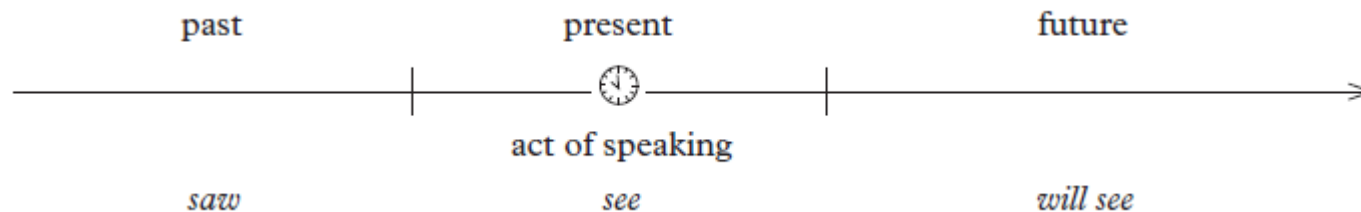
Situations	Static	Durative	Telic
States	[+]	[+]	n.a.
Activity	[-]	[+]	[-]
Accomplishment	[-]	[+]	[+]
Semelfactive	[-]	[-]	[-]
Achievement	[-]	[-]	[+]

- Examples of each situation state:

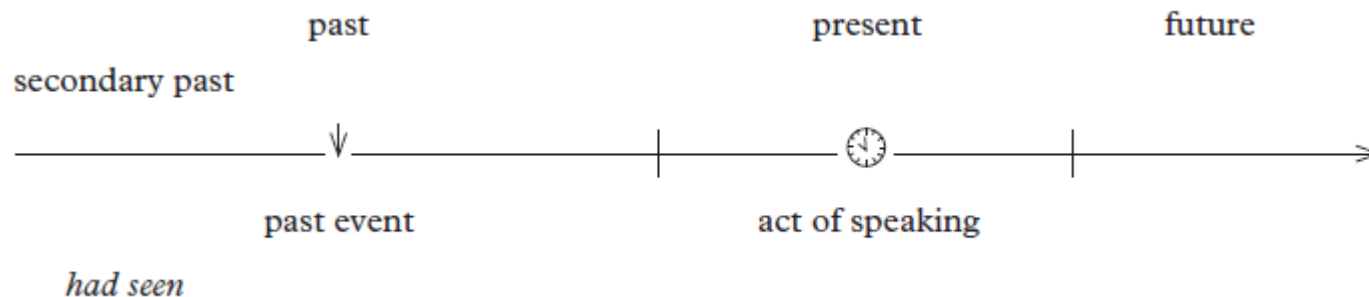
She hated ice cream.	(State)
Your cat watched those birds.	(Activity)
Her boss learned Japanese.	(Accomplishment)
The gate banged.	(Semelfactive)
The cease-fire began at noon yesterday.	(Achievement)

Sentential Semantics

- Tense is said to be a **deictic** (based on context) system, since the reference point for the system is usually the act of speaking.
- Simple tense



- Complex tense



Sentential Semantics

- Complex future tenses allow a creation of a past-of-a future event, as in an utterance now of:
 - *By 2050 we will have experienced at least two major earthquakes.*

Sentential Semantics

- **Aspect** systems allow speakers to relate situations and time, but instead of fixing situations in time relative to the act of speaking, like tense does, aspect allows speakers to view an event in various ways: as complete, or incomplete, short, long, or as something repeated over a period.

Sentential Semantics

- We can look at this interdependence between aspect and tense by outlining some of the main forms in English.

Present progressive	<i>I am listening</i>
Past progressive	<i>I was listening</i>
Future progressive	<i>I will be listening</i>

- In the past and future, progressives can be used to provide a background activity against which another event occurs, for example:
 - *She was hiding the money when the doorbell rang.*
 - *She'll be washing the car when you arrive.*

Sentential Semantics

- We can look at this interdependence between aspect and tense by outlining some of the main forms in English.

Present perfect	<i>I have listened</i>
Past perfect	<i>I had listened</i>
Future perfect	<i>I will have listened</i>

- The perfect aspect allows a speaker to emphasize the relevance of events in the past to the “present.” This relevance can be of different types: one is to give a “just now” sense of the immediate past, compare:
 - *Don't run. The train has left.*
 - *?Don't run. The train left.*

Sentential Semantics

- We can look at this interdependence between aspect and tense by outlining some of the main forms in English.

Simple present	<i>I listen</i>
Simple past	<i>I listened</i>
Simple future	<i>I will listen</i>

- These forms are simple tense forms which can be seen as basically neutral with respect to aspect: depending on other elements in the sentence, and on context, they are compatible with a number of aspects. Take for example the simple past form in
 - *I watched the six o'clock news.*
- This is compatible with a couple of interpretations: referring to one occasion in the
- past or describing a habitual action.

Sentential Semantics

- Speakers may also employ unusual tenses and aspects in narratives. For example, in many languages, including English, speakers and writers may narrate past events in the present tense, sometimes known as the **historical present**, to give immediacy to a description.
- From John le Carré's novel *The Night Manager*:
 - Jonathan is in the bedroom of the little flat in Luxor, with the moonlight sloping between the half-closed curtains. Sophie is lying on the bed in her white nightgown, eyes closed and face upward. Some of her drollness has returned. She has drunk a little vodka. So has he. The bottle stands between them.
- Since the description is in the present, the whole tense/aspect system is shifted, with the present perfect replacing the expected past perfect in, for example, "She has drunk a little vodka."

Exercises

- P. 143
- 5.1
- 5.2
- 5.4
- 5.6