Synthese (2008) 165:317–319
DOI 10.1007/s11229-007-9190-9

# The semantics/pragmatics distinction

**Isidora Stojanovic**

Published online: 5 June 2007


The semantics/pragmatics distinction is one of the most discussed topics in the philosophy of language today. Several collections have been devoted specifically to it (e.g. Turner 1999; Bianchi 2005; Szabo 2006), and a number of important recently published works address issues that crucially hinge upon the relationship between semantics and pragmatics (e.g. Levinson 2000; Perry 2001; Carston 2002; Borg 2004; Recanati 2004; Cappelen and Lepore 2005; Predelli 2005, and numerous journal articles). The present volume is a follow-up on the workshop "The Semantics/Pragmatics Distinction: What Is It, and Does It Really Matter?" held in Paris in July 2005 (http://spworkshop.online.fr).

The problem of the semantics/pragmatic distinction is, roughly, how to define 'semantics' and 'pragmatics' in a coherent and empirically plausible way. The source of the problem lies in the tensions among several initially plausible criteria that, at least at a first glance, may be used in drawing the line between semantics and pragmatics. The three main criteria may be roughly formulated as follows:

(i) ("lexical encoding"): Semantics deals with elements that are lexically encoded in the meaning of the words, pragmatics deals with elements that are not lexically encoded;
(ii) ("context-independence"): Semantics deals only with elements whose meaning does not depend on any contextual factors; elements that depend on the context belong to pragmatics;
(iii) ("truth-conditionality"): Semantics deals with elements that bear upon truth and truth conditions; pragmatic deals with elements that go beyond truth conditions, such as implicatures.

I. Stojanovic (✉)
Institut Jean Nicod, CNRS,
29 rue d'Ulm, Pavillon Jardin,
75005 Paris, France
e-mail: isidora@club-internet.fr

It takes little to realize that the criteria do not converge unproblematically towards a single distinction. Consider a sentence such as:

(1) I have had enough.

Whether or not this sentence, on a given occasion of use, is true, arguably depends not only upon the lexical (linguistic, conventional) meaning associated with this sentence, but on a number of other issues: who is the speaker, when was the sentence uttered, what is the thing of which enough has been had, and finally, what counts as enough. This generates a clash between criteria (ii) and (iii), since all these issues are determined by context, but are also relevant to the truth value of (1). Indexical elements, such as the pronoun 'I', are clearly context-dependent, but it is generally agreed that they are an object of study to *semantics*, rather than (just) to pragmatics. The case of the pronoun 'I' also suggests some clash between criteria (i) and (ii), since the context-dependence of 'I' is *lexicalized*: the lexical meaning of the first person pronoun is precisely that the pronoun is used to refer to the speaker (Kaplan 1977). Presented with context-dependent elements that should count as semantic according to criteria (i) (lexical encoding) and (iii) (truth-conditionality), philosophers were led to distinguish between two notions of context, "narrow" versus "broad", where narrow context specifies the speaker, the place, the time, and perhaps the world (hence it is context in Kaplan's sense), while broad context includes that and "all the rest" (see e.g. Bach (2000)). But that will help little in solving the problem. Fix the narrow context—suppose it is David Kaplan who says (1) on January 31, 2007, at noon. Determining the truth conditions of (1) still seems to depend upon further contextual factors. Whether he says (1) to his wife while she is serving him salad (meaning that he has had enough of the salad), or to a friend in course of a conversation about students' term papers (meaning that he has had enough of papers to grade) may give rise to different truth values. And even if we fix the subject matter—suppose it is the students' papers—whether he means to be saying that he has had enough for the rest of the day, or for the rest of the year, or for the rest of his career, are again contextual elements that neither belong to the narrow context nor are lexicalized (at least, not in any fruitful sense of "lexical encoding"), and yet, appear to reach into the truth-conditional content of (1).

The essays in the present collection attempt to shed new light on these problems. Robyn Carston argues that something very similar to criterion (i) is central to drawing the line between semantics and pragmatics. By the end of her paper, Carston also addresses the issue of what is needed to get pragmatic inference started. This issue is also discussed by Kepa Korta and John Perry. They show how their proposal, based on the "reflexive-referential" theory of Perry (2001), avoids what they call "the pragmatic circle": the idea that (broadly) contextual reasoning may be required for determining the semantic content (as the example of (1) suggests), and yet that, according to the standard Gricean picture, semantic content (or 'what is said') is one of the main inputs to pragmatic inference.

why should we fear the pragmatic circle? circles, circuits are important in the brain

Christopher Gauker challenges the view, endorsed by many, that determining the reference of deictic elements, such as demonstrative pronouns, most often involves pragmatic reasoning about the speaker's beliefs or intentions, and outlines an alternative theory of demonstratives that does not appeal to pragmatics (understood in this sense). Brendan Gillon discusses linguistic evidence that suggests that only lexical (or grammatical) context-dependence may reach into semantics, and concludes that, in the case of quantifier domain restriction, the context-dependence is pragmatic rather than semantic. Finally, Napoleon Katsos offers new perspectives on the kind of considerations that may bear upon the delineation between semantics and pragmatics. Discussing the particular case of scalar implicatures, he demonstrates how the experimental paradigms used in psycholinguistics may shed light on such prima facie philosophical issues as that of the semantics/pragmatics distinction.

## References

Bach, K. (2000). Semantic, pragmatic. In J. Keim Campbell, M. O'Rourke, & D. Shier (Eds.), *Meaning and truth* (pp. 284–292). New York: Seven Bridges Press.
Bianchi, C. (Ed.). (2005). *The semantics/pragmatics distinction.* Stanford: CSLI Publications.
Borg, E. (2004). *Minimal semantics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Cappelen, H., & Lepore, E. (2005). *Insensitive semantics*. Oxford: Blackwell.
Carston, R. (2002). *Thoughts and utterances: The pragmatics of explicit communication*. Oxford: Blackwell.
Kaplan, D. (1977). Demonstratives. An essay on the semantics, logic, metaphysics, and epistemology of demonstratives and other indexicals. In J. Almog, J. Perry, & H. Wettstein (Eds.), *Themes from Kaplan* (pp. 481–563). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Levinson, S. (2000). *Presumptive meanings: The theory of generalized conversational implicature*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Perry, J. (2001). *Reference and reflexivity*. Stanford: CSLI Publications.
Predelli, S. (2005). *Contexts. Meaning, truth, and the use of language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Recanati, F. (2004). *Literal meaning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Szabo, Z. (Ed.). (2006). *Semantics vs. pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Turner, K. (Ed.). (1999). *The semantics-pragmatics interface from different points of view*. Oxford: Elsevier.