Review Article

Kitis on Meaning in Language*

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Abstract

As its title, *Semantics: Meaning in Language*, indicates the focus of this book is on context-less meaning ("narrow semantics"), for all that the intention is to throw light on issues of language use. Two main approaches are discussed in detail. The first has its origin in the philosophy of language, and is concerned with the extra-linguistic relations between units of language and items in the world; key concepts are reference, denotation and truth. The second originates in linguistics and concentrates on intra-linguistic relations such as antonymy and synonymy. However, at many points the question arises whether these approaches to narrow semantics need to be supplemented by pragmatics.

Keywords

truth conditions – reference – deixis – context – word-meaning – antonyms – lexical pragmatics

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This is a thoughtful and thought provoking introduction. Whilst it covers a lot of ground, its subject is restricted to meaning in language, "what can be called a 'narrow' or context-less semantics" (2012: 14). But at the same time the intention is to open a window on to issues of language use, and questions about what belongs to "narrow semantics" (= context-less semantics) and what to theories of language use (= pragmatics) often arise. These in turn lead to some further interesting questions, since it seems that rather less may belong to narrow semantics than one might have thought.

Kitis argues that two main sources of modern semantics have been philosophy and linguistics itself, though there have, of course, been others. Beginning with the former, some philosophers have argued that a theory of use is central ("Don't ask for the meaning ask for the use"). However, the theories she discusses have taken their inspiration from logic, the semantics of which has provided a model for that of natural language. Key concepts on this account are that of reference, denotation and truth, and the meaning of a sentence is typically explicated in terms of its truth conditions. As she points out, those who take this approach often "take the view that we can define meaning as an abstract relation between the observable language and its units (words, structures, etc.) ... and the external world or reality to which these units refer or relate—irrespective of *how* language-users conceptualise or internalise this relation" (: 18). In other words, theories like this are in no sense psychological; indeed, it has been argued that it can only cause confusion to treat them as such: thus, David Lewis argues that one must "distinguish two topics: first, the description of possible languages or grammars as abstract semantic systems whereby symbols are associated with aspects of the world; and, second, the description of the psychological and sociological facts whereby a particular one of these abstract semantic systems is the one used by a person or population. Only confusion comes of mixing these two topics" (Lewis 1970: 19). If this is correct narrow semantics is not only possible, but the only way forward.

Starting with sentence-meaning, Kitis argues that sentences are context-independent, language specific, abstract entities, which express propositions (: 59). A key move is to analyse a simple proposition, e.g., that expressed by a declarative sentence such as

(1)   George flies aeroplanes,

into a subject or argument, which is not its grammatical subject but what is referred to by it, and a predicate "flies aeroplanes", which again is not to be confused with a grammatical predicate, whose meaning is such that (1) is true if and only if George flies aeroplanes. One explanation of why this is so is that

the predicate in question has a referential dimension, its denotation, which is the class of those who fly aeroplanes, so that (1) is true if George is a member of this class, otherwise false. This type of analysis is readily extended to more complicated cases; for example, the proposition expressed by

(2)   George hit Mary,

has a predicate "hit", which requires two arguments, etc.

Proper names are of course only one sort of referring expression. There are many others including definite and indefinite descriptions, pronouns, and demonstratives, which are the subject of a detailed and helpful discussion. However, at this point she endorses a view of the nature of reference which raises a question of how much of the theory of reference does or should belong to narrow semantics. For according to her, reference is an utterance dependent notion. Thus she writes that "for a term such as ... 'the cat' to have reference, it has to be used by a particular speaker on a particular occasion. ... Reference assignment is only possible in discourse, and discourse is—very crudely—language used in specific situations" (: 77). It is of course true that some definite descriptions are uniquely satisfied, e.g., *The King of France in 1789*, but most are not like that. So though in a room full of cats it may be quite clear which cat is referred to by an utterance of

(3)   Give it to the cat then,

this isn't determined by the meaning of *the cat* alone; on one occasion it may be Fluffy that is deserving, but on another Tabitha: in other words, we need to be able to work out which one the speaker meant. But at this point have we not strayed beyond the confines of narrow semantics into pragmatics? That would certainly be the view of an author of a widely read book on pragmatics who writes: "Pragmatics is concerned with the study of meaning as communicated by a speaker (or writer) and as interpreted by a listener (or reader). It has consequently more to do with what people mean by their utterances, than what the words or phrases in those utterances might mean by themselves. *Pragmatics is the study of speaker meaning*" (Yule, 1996: 3). He goes on to argue that "expressions themselves cannot be treated as having reference (as is often assumed in semantic discussions), but are, or are not, 'invested' with referential function in a context by a speaker or writer" (Yule, 1996: 19). This should perhaps not come as a surprise to Kitis whose own account of pragmatics is somewhat similar. She says that sentence-meaning (aka "literal-meaning") "can be very broadly equated to the thought the specific sentence

expresses irrespective of any contexts" (2012: 59); which seems to be similar to what Carston has in mind by "Context-independent linguistically encoded meaning (LEM)" (Carston, 2008: 322). Sentence-meaning, Kitis goes on to say, is to be contrasted with utterance-meaning, which is sentence-meaning contextualised: "moreover [utterance meaning] is often determined by the speaker's communicative intention" (2012: 61), and it is usually studied in pragmatics. So at the very least, if narrow semantics is the study of sentence-meaning, then it needs to be supplemented by something else to give an account of reference; and if propositions are bearers of truth values, then (1) and (2) do not express propositions.

Whilst on the topic of reference, two other points can be made. First, Kitis goes on to give a helpful survey of deixis, which cannot be discussed in detail here. However, the conclusion of the previous paragraph is reinforced by her argument that "deictics such as pronouns make language context-dependent, [so that] we need to know the spatio-temporal correlates of the speech-event in order to evaluate uttered sentences as true or false" (: 192)—a claim that is now widely accepted. Given the number of different types of deixis distinguished (place, time, person and social), and the issues raised in an account of them, a truth conditional approach will, as she points out, at the very least be much more complicated than it seemed at first sight, unless deixis is eliminable. In this context, Russell's proposal that all indexicals (his term for deictics) are definable in terms of "this" is interesting (Russell, 1973: 102); for might it not then be possible to replace "this" with a description (: 191)? It is, I think, doubtful whether Russell thought it always could be (Farrell Smith, 1984: 133), and anyway the definitions proposed will not do for reasons that Kitis gives. Russell suggests that if we take "this" as primitive, then " 'here' means 'the place of this'; 'now' means 'the time of this': and so on" (Russell, 1973). But setting aside the problems there are with this proposal, if "this" is taken to have a subjective reference, as Russell seems to have done, the proposal is plausible only if "here" has to refer to the place of utterance and "now" to the time of utterance. But as Kitis points out, this is not so. Responding to a French friend's comment that unemployment is high in France, I might say "Here it is falling" and be understood correctly to have claimed that it is falling in the UK. A similar point can be made about "now". So we need to know more than the spatio-temporal coordinates of an utterance to interpret indexicals. Clearly, pragmatics has an important role to play in determining their reference and hence the truth conditions of the utterance of a sentence containing them. Quite what the respective roles of semantics and pragmatics are at this point is of course a matter for further discussion (see Carston, 2008; Gauker, 2012); but nothing said so far casts doubt I think on the contention that

to understand an utterance of a declarative sentence one must grasp its truth conditions.

The other point is that Kitis argues that proper names should be treated differently from other referring expressions "because in their use we can assume **unique reference** to individuals. Proper names "do not have variable reference as common nouns do" (2012: 110). But whilst we can agree that, as she says, there is only one Eliza Kitis and, moreover, that "Eliza Kitis" is a rigid designator in the sense that in the rest of this discourse/argument/ its reference is presumed not to change, that doesn't mean that there is no one else with that name, and that there are no circumstances in which one would need to ask which "Eliza" do you mean. I should add that a later footnote suggests that she might agree that this is so, for she concludes her discussion by saying that "we sidestep this controversial issue here" (: 111).

Kitis goes on to discuss formal approaches to semantics which develop systematically the central idea that the meaning of a sentence is given by its truth conditions, a view which, though it has its origins in philosophical logic, has appealed to some linguists (see Kempson, 1977, for a very clear account). Following Allwood, Andersson and Dahl (1977), she employs elementary set theory to elucidate her explanations of sentence connectives; but for my taste this is a needless complication for beginners being introduced to truth tables with which they are apt to struggle anyway. The interest of propositional calculus for the study of the semantics of natural languages lies both in its explanations of sentential connectives, which enables one to determine the truth value of a compound proposition provided that one knows the truth values of its components, and also as a model of the way in which a proposition's logical form determines which inferences can be drawn from it. So that, for example, a proposition of the form "p&q" is said to be true if both p and q are true, otherwise false, and something from which we can infer p, q and q&p, etc. Since & is informally read as "and", it is tempting to explain the natural language connective in the same way. So that provided that one knows the truth value of (4a) and (4b), one can compute that of (4c), which according to this view will have the same truth value as (4d):

(4) a. John is here.
     b. Mary is here.
     c. John is here and Mary is here.
     d. Mary is here and John is here.

Kitis argues, however, that there are cases which suggest that more needs to be said, though she does concede that "the gains from at least an initial semantic

interpretation are not to be neglected and may form a stable stepping ground for richer interpretations" (: 168). An example of such a case would be one in which the order of the conjuncts "can have causal implications" (: 169), e.g.,

(5)   a. They got married and had a child,
          and
      b. They had a child and got married.

To explain this additional aspect of meaning, theories such as that of Grice (1975), which use pragmatic principles to account for the difference, have been proposed. However, she endorses a range of criticisms of Grice, so that the route he takes to explain the difference is not available to her. Nevertheless, there may be other pragmatic theories which can do this, so there is a stand-off at this point even if she is right about Grice. However, if she is correct in claiming that the meanings of *but, however, although*, etc., cannot be explained truth functionally, which again is widely accepted, then there are clear limits to this kind of explanation. Presumably, though semantics should be able to say something about these connectives, so that even if an explanation of their use on a particular occasion involves pragmatics, there is something that one can say is common to each of these occasions.

   Any problems affecting sentence connectives carry over, of course, to predicate logic, which involves an analysis of the internal structure of propositions, and forms the subject of the following chapter. This discusses a wide range of topics, sometimes rather briefly. A key idea is that of a quantifier, for all that at this point the logical form proposed for propositions diverges markedly from their grammatical form in natural language. A famous example is Russell's Theory of Descriptions, which, interpreting "F" as "is present King of France" and "G" as "is bald", analyses (6a) as (6b):

(6)   a. The present King of France is bald,
      b. $\exists x(Fx \ \& \ \forall y(Fy \rightarrow x=y) \ \& \ Gx,$

claiming that what (6a) states is that something is F and G and at most one thing is F. Russell thought that (6a) is false, and, moreover, that the analysis explains why it is, because nothing is F. Further, because there is no constituent in the logical form proposed for (6a) corresponding to its grammatical subject *The Present King of France*, Russell argues that its grammatical form is not a good guide to its logical form. In fact, Kitis rejects Russell's analysis, agreeing with Strawson that $\exists x(Fx)$ is something that is presupposed rather than

asserted by (6a), so that if it is false an assertion of (6a) is neither true nor false. But whether or not she is right to do so, Russell's proposal embodies two important ideas: first that a logical form should enable one to draw all and only the correct inferences that follow from the meaning of a sentence (Kempson, 1977: 39); and second that logical and grammatical forms may be very different. These ideas have been widely accepted, leading to proposals that at first may well seem unintuitive. An example discussed by Kitis (2012: 199) is that of action sentences. Davidson has proposed that we think of "kicked" not as a two place predicate, but as a three place predicate, so that the correct analysis of (7a) is not (7b), but (7c):

(7)   a. John kicked George.
       b. Kicked (John, George).
       c. ∃x (Kicked (John, George, x)).

Hence, what (7a) claims on this analysis is that there is an event x such that x is a kicking of George by John. One motive for proposing this is that we can then explain the inference of (7a) from (7d) analysed as (7e):

(7)   d. John kicked George unexpectedly.
       e. ∃x (Kicked (John, George, x)) & unexpected x.

The proposal has many critics, but is but one of many examples of the way in which harnessing the resources of quantification theory with the choice of different domains leads to interesting new proposals. Thus, as her discussion makes clear, predicate logic is a rich resource, even if, as she argues, there are many quantifiers which it is difficult to analyse in the way that "some" and "all" are, including "a few", "many", "most" and "several".

It might be argued at this point that a defect of predicate logic as a model for natural language is that it has a somewhat impoverished syntax, though Montague Grammar is an exception. Because of this the adverb in the predicate "kicked unexpectedly" is not identifiable as such; whereas if it was, the inference of (7a) from (7d) would be relatively straightforward. So a different approach might be fruitful at this point, i.e., one "where the concern has been with meaning within language, that is, with the relation between linguistic expressions and their meanings" (: 210). This is an approach which has been developed within linguistic semantics, the second major source of ideas mentioned in the introduction, and has in part developed from the claim made by structuralists that the meaning of a linguistic sign has to be explained in terms of its paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations to other signs within the system

to which it belongs. So at this point we are concerned with intra-linguistic relations, that is, the ways in which the meaning of words and other expressions relate to each other rather than with their denotation or reference. A description of these is an important part of the conception of semantics ably defended in Katz (1972), amongst others, which can, I think, fairly be described as narrow.

The intra-linguistic approach is the subject of a chapter which is perhaps the best in the book. The topics covered include non-gradable and gradable antonyms, converses, polysemy, homonymy, synonymy, etc. There is also a discussion of the use of semantic markers as a way of analysing the sense of a term into more basic components, but Kitis has reservations about componential analysis (2012: 252), and makes limited use of them. In fact, her discussion departs from a strict intra-linguistic approach at several points. When, for instance, she extends the discussion to intra-sentential relations she has recourse to referential concepts; and there are many points at which she claims that an intra-linguistic explanation needs to be supplemented by a pragmatic one. But precisely what aspects of a word's meaning can plausibly be described in terms of its intra-linguistic relations anyway? In an earlier discussion of lexical meaning she asks whether the starting point for semantic theory should be words or sentences (: 51). Some have seemed to suggest that the meaning of a word is given by its use on a particular occasion, perhaps with the implication that it is difficult to generalise further. But, as she points out, if we start with words we have to give an account of how their senses combine to determine that of more inclusive units and ultimately that of indefinitely many sentences. On the other hand, if like Quine's jungle linguist we make a start with conjectures about the meaning of sentences, to make progress we have to speculate about the way which sub-sentential units and ultimately words contribute to that meaning. In either case we need to assume that words can make the same contribution to the meaning of different sentences. Kitis, though worried about polysemy, idiosyncratic uses, etc., concludes that "words do have some fixed meaning that is basic to all their occurrences ...; this is the **core meaning** they have even when they are encountered out of context" (: 53). She suggest that core meaning belongs to *langue*, in Saussure's sense, whereas other uses, e.g., poetic ones, will arise in *parole*. This implies, I think, that intra-linguistic relations between the meanings of words are concerned only with core-meaning, and belong to *langue*, but that there may be other facets of their meaning which are not describable in this way.

Complementary antonyms, i.e., ones which are mutually exclusive, have played an important role in theories of this sort; but it is an interesting question whether they necessarily are exclusive. Kitis suggests that though the pairs *day:night*, *morning:evening* can function as complementaries, whether they do

or not depends on "a certain context" (: 216). But apart from the fact that if this was so, core meaning would not determine what the relationship was, the latter pair are arguably not complementaries since they are separated by *afternoon*— as indeed is pointed out (: 214). So perhaps we do not need to have recourse to context after all at this point; and though a decision may be taken which has the effect that a pair of terms that were complementary are no longer so (e.g., the recent German decision to recognise a third gender), this is not, I think, a matter of *pragmatic* context. Nevertheless, the question remains whether intra-linguistic explanations can avoid recourse to pragmatics altogether. In the light of the earlier discussion it would not be surprising if words whose use involves deixis cannot do so, even if they exemplify interesting intra-linguistic relations; an example which Kitis gives is the pair *left:right*. And there are others; in the course of an interesting discussion of gradable antonyms she points out that they are compared with respect to an assumed norm, middle point or zero point (: 218). But of course the fact that two adjectives, e.g., *big:small*, consti-tute a pair of gradable antonyms does not itself tell us what the relevant norm is, so that a big mouse, is nevertheless a small mammal. It might be argued that what is relevant is made clear by the noun that is modified in each case. But that is not always so; whether something is a long walk or not will depend on many factors such as the age, fitness, expectations of the walker. So context is needed to determine what proposition is expressed by an utterance contain-ing a gradable antonym (Lyons 1977: 275). Another point at which this is so, Kitis argues, arises with the choice of one of a pair of antonyms, for often one is marked, the other not, and the unmarked term "of an antonym pair is evalua-tive positive, whereas the marked one is negative" (2012: 223). I am not sure that the unmarked term is evaluative in general, for whilst we do indeed normally prefer things to be safe rather than dangerous and clean rather than dirty, we do not normally have a preference for hot things rather than cold ones, or big ones rather than small ones. So that in the former case the unmarked term is evaluative because the opposition is. But she is right to argue that a question of the form *How X is it?* is appropriate in different contexts if *X* is the marked term from those in which it is the unmarked term. So whereas "How small is it?" carries a presupposition that it is not big, "How big is it?" clearly does not presuppose that it is not small, since "Quite small" is an acceptable answer.

By definition lexical pragmatics could not be a part of intra-linguistic seman-tics. Nevertheless its relationship to lexical semantics poses some interesting questions raised by Kitis. The kind of relations we have been discussing can, she suggests, be modulated in context, so that antonyms such as *lawful:unlaw-ful* and *love:hate* are not in that context exclusive; hence, actions described as not lawful, because they violate human rights, may nevertheless be described as

not completely unlawful (: 256). Presumably, if this was not possible, language would be a much less creative instrument of thought and communication than it is. Also, we need to be able to account for new uses of old words as well as the creation, perhaps rare, of completely new ones. This is, I think, not a topic which can be consigned to a diachronic study, for if language is to be a flexible instrument of thought and communication the lexicon can hardly be a fixed inventory of words which we cannot use in new ways. There are of course "conventional" ways of being innovative, illustrated by Shakespeare's "He has unkinged me"; but there are, of course, many other ways of being creative, e.g., metaphor.

The conclusion of this discussion then has to be that the scope of narrow semantics is quite narrow, and that the "window on to pragmatics" is a window onto a complex set of topics which need to be addressed to give a complete account of the concept of meaning. I have concentrated on this theme because of its intrinsic interest; but I should add that the book contains interesting discussions of many other topics, including default reasoning and cognitive semantics, which there is not space to discuss here.

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