Introduction to Semantics

• Semantics and Meaning
• Semantics and Linguistics
• Semantics in other disciplines
• Sentences, Utterances and Propositions
Semantics and Meaning

Semantics: the study of meaning
“meaning” ???
- Covers a variety of aspects of language
- No very general agreement either about what meaning is or about the way in which it should be described
The term “semantics”

“semantique” - a French term derived from Greek by M. Breal (1893)

“Reflected meanings: a point in semantics”
A paper of American Philological Association (1894)

In above cases, the term not only refers to “meaning”, but also to its development called “historical semantics”
“Semantics: studies in the science of meaning”
A book by M. Breal (1900)

“The meaning of meaning”
A book by C.K.Ogden and I.A.Richards (1923)
The term appeared in an appendix entitled “The problem of meaning in primitive languages” by anthropologist B. Malinowski
Meaning ???

I mean to be there tomorrow
The sense of ‘intend’

Those clouds mean thunder
A red light means ‘stop’
Signs indicating:
something that is happening or will happen
something has to be done
What does ‘calligraphy’ means?

‘Calligraphy’ is beautiful handwriting.

The reply provides other words that the speaker thinks the hearer can understand.

It provides definitions, suggesting words or phrases which have the ‘same’ meaning.
To consider:

If words have a meaning, how can we fail to say what we mean? How can the words fail to mean what they mean?

There is some other meaning besides the ‘literal’ meaning of the words.

Consider linguistic signs, e.g. intonation, stress, and non-linguistic signs, e.g. wink.
Semantics and Linguistics
Language as a communication system

Semantics --- Grammar --- Phonetics

Message ---- Set of Signs or Symbol

Ferdinand de Saussure:
Signified ---- Signifier (Sign)
Linguistics:

V the scientific study of language

If semantics is part of linguistics, it must be no less scientific.

One essential requirement of a scientific study is that statements made within it must be verifiable by observation.

Phonetics

describe the operations of the vocal organs

precisely measure the physical characteristics of the sounds emitted.

Semantics???
Also, scientific study must be concerned not with specific instances, but with generalisations.

Phonetics

- not primarily concerned with the particular sounds that are made at a particular time by a particular person
- listen to a number of individual utterances of a word, e.g. book, but it will make a generalised statement on the basis of this
Semantics ???

- not normally concerned with the meaning that any individual wishes to place on his words
- an individual’s meaning is not part of the general study of semantics
Semantics in other disciplines