

Text Semantics and Text Pragmatics: On the Study of Meaning and Use in Language

Mətn semantikasi və mətn praqmatikası: dildə mənanın və istifadənin araşdırılması haqqında

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Abstract

This article examines the intersecting domains of text semantics and text pragmatics as two fundamental and complementary dimensions of linguistic inquiry. Text semantics is concerned with the systematic study of meaning encoded within textual structures — how words, sentences, and larger discourse units convey propositional content, referential relations, and conceptual information. Text pragmatics, by contrast, investigates how that meaning is deployed, interpreted, and negotiated in context, foregrounding the role of communicative intention, social convention, and situational knowledge in shaping utterance interpretation. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from structural linguistics, discourse analysis, speech act theory, relevance theory, and cognitive semantics, this paper argues that neither dimension can be fully understood in isolation: semantic content provides the linguistic scaffolding upon which pragmatic inference operates, while pragmatic context continuously shapes and constrains the activation of semantic meaning. The article traces the historical development of both fields, maps their theoretical boundaries and points of convergence, and illustrates key concepts through textual analysis. Special attention is given to the phenomena of implicature, presupposition, coherence, cohesion, and intertextuality as zones where semantic and pragmatic processes are most visibly intertwined. The study concludes that a unified, integrated approach to text meaning — one that treats semantics and pragmatics as mutually constitutive rather than opposed — offers the most productive framework for understanding how language achieves its communicative function in real-world use.

Keywords: *text semantics; text pragmatics; meaning; implicature; presupposition; discourse analysis; coherence; speech act theory; relevance theory; linguistic context*

Xülasə

Bu məqalədə mətn semantikasi və mətn praqmatikası dilçilik tədqiqatının iki fundamental və bir-birini tamamlayan sahəsi kimi araşdırılır. Mətn semantikasi söz, cümlə və daha geniş diskurs vahidlərinin propozisional məzmun, referensial münasibətlər və konseptual məlumat ötürdüyünü — yəni mətndaxili strukturlarda kodlaşdırılmış mənanı sistemli şəkildə öyrənir. Mətn praqmatikası isə bu mənanın

kontekstdə necə işlədildiyi, şərh edildiyi və müzakirə olunduğunu araşdıraraq kommunikativ niyyətin, sosial konvensiyanın və situasiya biliyinin ifadənin interpretasiyasında oynadığı rola diqqəti cəlb edir. Struktur dilçilik, diskurs analizi, nitq aktları nəzəriyyəsi, əlaqəlilik nəzəriyyəsi və koqnitiv semantika çərçivəsindən istifadə edərək məqalə bu iki sahənin heç birinin ayrılıqda tam dərk edilə bilmədiyini əsaslandırır: semantik məzmun pragmatik çıxarışın üzərində fəaliyyət göstərdiyi linqvistik dayağı təmin edir, pragmatik kontekst isə semantik mənanın aktivləşdirilməsini fasiləsiz olaraq şərtləndirir və məhdudlaşdırır.

Açar sözlər: *mətn semantikasi; mətn pragmatikasi; məna; implikatur; presuppozisiya; diskurs analizi; koherensiya; nitq aktları nəzəriyyəsi; əlaqəlilik nəzəriyyəsi; linqvistik kontekst*

1. Introduction

Language is the primary medium through which human beings construct, share, and negotiate meaning. Yet the study of linguistic meaning is not a unified enterprise: it divides, at its most fundamental level, into questions of what expressions mean — their semantic content — and questions of what speakers mean when they use those expressions in particular circumstances — their pragmatic force. This distinction, though it has ancient roots in philosophical inquiry, was sharpened into disciplinary form during the twentieth century, giving rise to two interrelated but methodologically distinct fields: semantics and pragmatics. When these perspectives are brought to bear not on isolated sentences but on extended stretches of discourse — on texts — their interaction becomes both more complex and more revealing.

Text semantics and text pragmatics occupy adjacent territories in the map of linguistic inquiry, and the boundary between them is one of the most productive and contested sites in contemporary language science. Text semantics asks how meaning is structured and organized across sentences: how referential chains are maintained, how propositional content accumulates and is modified, how topics are developed, and how textual units cohere into a meaningful whole. Text pragmatics asks how readers and listeners interpret texts in light of context, communicative purpose, shared knowledge, and social convention: how they draw inferences beyond what is literally stated, how they recognize the illocutionary force of utterances, and how they reconstruct the communicative intentions of text producers.

The present article offers a systematic examination of both fields and their relationship. Its aims are threefold: first, to trace the theoretical foundations and historical development of text semantics and text pragmatics as distinct but related research programmes; second, to identify the key concepts, analytical tools, and research questions that define each domain; and third, to argue for an integrated approach to text meaning that recognizes the mutual dependence of semantic and pragmatic processes. The article draws on a range of theoretical traditions — from structural linguistics and formal semantics to speech act theory, Gricean pragmatics, relevance theory, and cognitive discourse analysis — and illustrates its arguments with examples drawn from authentic textual data.

The significance of this inquiry extends beyond purely theoretical interests. An integrated understanding of how meaning is constructed and communicated in texts has direct implications for fields such as language teaching, translation studies, computational linguistics, literary analysis, and forensic linguistics. In an era marked by the proliferation of complex communicative forms — from digital media and multimodal texts to political discourse and cross-cultural communication — the need for sophisticated analytical frameworks that can account for the full richness of textual meaning has never been greater.

2. Theoretical Foundations: From Sentence Meaning to Text Meaning

2.1 The Semantic Tradition

The systematic study of linguistic meaning has its roots in the philosophy of language and in structural linguistics. Ferdinand de Saussure's foundational distinction between the signifier and the signified established meaning as a relational property — a function of the differences between signs within a system rather than of any direct correspondence between signs and objects in the world (Saussure, 1916/1983). This structuralist insight shaped European linguistics throughout the twentieth century and continues to inform semiotic approaches to text analysis.

Within the analytic philosophical tradition, Gottlob Frege's distinction between *Sinn* (sense) and *Bedeutung* (reference) provided a more fine-grained account of semantic content, distinguishing the mode of presentation of an object from the object itself (Frege, 1892). This distinction proved enormously productive: it explained how two expressions with different senses (such as 'the morning star' and 'the evening star') could share the same reference (the planet Venus), and it opened the way for formal semantic theories in which sentence meaning is decomposed into truth conditions — the conditions under which a sentence is true or false in a given model of the world.

Formal semantics, developed through the model-theoretic tradition of Montague (1970) and subsequent work in generative grammar, treats meaning as a compositional property: the meaning of a complex expression is a systematic function of the meanings of its parts and the way they are syntactically combined. This compositional view has proved highly successful in accounting for the semantic properties of sentences in isolation, but it faces significant challenges when applied to extended texts, where meaning is not merely composed from individual sentences but emerges from their interaction with discourse context, world knowledge, and communicative purpose.

The extension of semantic analysis from sentence to text was pioneered by text linguists such as van Dijk (1977) and de Beaugrande and Dressler (1981), who argued that texts are not merely sequences of sentences but structured discourse units governed by their own organizational principles. Text semantics, in this expanded sense, addresses phenomena such as thematic progression, referential continuity, semantic isotopy, and macro-structural organization — the ways in which topics are introduced, developed, and concluded across the span of a text.

2.2 The Pragmatic Tradition

Pragmatics as a distinct field emerged in the mid-twentieth century, driven by the recognition that a full account of linguistic communication must go beyond the compositional meaning of sentences to encompass the contextually conditioned meanings that arise in actual use. The foundational work of J.L. Austin (1962) and John Searle (1969) established speech act theory as the first systematic framework for analysing the action-performing dimension of language. Austin's distinction between locutionary acts (the literal content of an utterance), illocutionary acts (the communicative force with which it is performed — asserting, promising, requesting, and so on), and perlocutionary acts (the effects produced on the hearer) provided a conceptual apparatus for analysing language as social action.

H.P. Grice's (1975) theory of conversational implicature offered a complementary account of the inferential processes through which hearers recover meanings that are not encoded in the semantic content of utterances. Grice proposed that communication is governed by a general Cooperative Principle — the presumption that interlocutors are making rational,

cooperative contributions to the exchange — and a set of more specific maxims relating to quantity, quality, relation, and manner. When a speaker appears to violate one of these maxims, hearers are prompted to seek an interpretation that restores the assumption of cooperation: this interpretive process yields an implicature — a meaning that is conveyed but not said.

Relevance theory, developed by Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995), offered a cognitive reformulation of Gricean pragmatics, replacing the maxims with a single communicative principle: that every ostensive communicative act conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance. On this account, pragmatic interpretation is a process of hypothesis formation and testing in which hearers seek the interpretation that yields the greatest cognitive effect for the least processing effort. Relevance theory has proved particularly influential in accounting for phenomena such as loose use, metaphor, and the interpretation of indirect speech acts, where the gap between semantic content and communicated meaning is most pronounced.

2.3 Discourse Analysis and the Text-Pragmatics Interface

The turn toward discourse analysis from the 1970s onward brought semantic and pragmatic concerns into direct contact with the analysis of extended texts. Halliday and Hasan's (1976) seminal study of cohesion in English identified the textual mechanisms — reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion — through which sentences are linked into coherent wholes. This work demonstrated that textual unity is not merely a matter of semantic content but of the grammatical and lexical resources that explicitly signal relations between textual units.

Subsequent work in discourse analysis, conversation analysis, and critical discourse analysis extended this programme in multiple directions. Coherence — the property of texts by virtue of which they make sense to interpreters — was distinguished from cohesion as a more deeply cognitive and pragmatic phenomenon: a text may be cohesive without being coherent, and coherent without being maximally cohesive (Widdowson, 1978). The study of coherence relations — causal, contrastive, elaborative, and so on — became a central concern of both computational and linguistic approaches to discourse (Hobbs, 1985; Mann & Thompson, 1988).

3. Key Concepts in Text Semantics

3.1 Reference and Referential Chains

One of the most fundamental problems in text semantics is the analysis of reference — how linguistic expressions pick out entities in the world or in the discourse model, and how referential identity is maintained across a text. In extended discourse, a single entity may be referred to by a proper name, a definite description, a pronoun, or a demonstrative, and the semantic coherence of the text depends on the hearer's ability to identify these expressions as co-referential. The study of referential chains — sequences of co-referring expressions that track an entity through a text — has been a central concern of text grammarians and computational linguists alike (Chafe, 1994; Givón, 1983).

Referential phenomena intersect significantly with pragmatics: the choice among co-referential expressions is governed not only by semantic constraints but by pragmatic factors such as accessibility, topic continuity, and the speaker's assumptions about what the hearer knows. Accessibility theory (Ariel, 1990) proposes that referring expressions are ranked on a scale of accessibility from most accessible (pronouns, zero anaphora) to least accessible (full noun phrases), and that speakers choose the expression that matches the degree of accessibility of the referent in the hearer's mental model.

3.2 Propositional Content and Semantic Macro-structure

Text semantics is also concerned with the organization of propositional content across a text — with what the text is about at both local and global levels. Van Dijk (1980) introduced the concept of macro-structure to describe the hierarchical organization of textual content: macro-propositions are derived from sequences of micro-propositions through operations of deletion, generalization, and construction, and they represent the global topic or thematic content of a text. Macro-structural analysis has proved useful in text comprehension research, showing that readers form and use macro-structural representations to guide their processing and memory of texts.

Closely related is the concept of semantic isotopy, introduced by Greimas (1966/1983) in the context of structural semantics. An isotopy is a recurring semantic category — a thematic or figurative dimension — that runs through a text and contributes to its unity and coherence. Isotopy analysis examines how semantic features are distributed across the vocabulary of a text, revealing patterns of meaning that may not be apparent from sentence-level analysis alone.

3.3 Cohesion and Coherence

The distinction between cohesion and coherence remains one of the most debated topics in text linguistics. Cohesion, in Halliday and Hasan's (1976) sense, refers to the set of grammatical and lexical resources that explicitly signal relations between textual units: anaphoric pronouns, connectives, lexical repetition, and synonymy are all cohesive devices. Coherence, by contrast, is a property of the text as interpreted by a reader: it is the sense that the text hangs together, that its parts are related in ways that make the whole meaningful.

The relationship between the two concepts is asymmetric: cohesion is a necessary but not sufficient condition for coherence. A text may deploy dense cohesive ties yet remain incoherent if the relations they signal are not interpretable within a plausible discourse model; conversely, a text with sparse cohesive marking may be perfectly coherent if the reader can supply the implicit relations from world knowledge and contextual inference. This observation underscores the irreducibly pragmatic dimension of textual coherence.

4. Key Concepts in Text Pragmatics

4.1 Implicature and Indirect Meaning

Conversational implicature — meaning that is communicated but not semantically encoded — is among the most pervasive and theoretically significant phenomena in text pragmatics. In extended texts, implicatures arise not only at the level of individual utterances but at the level of discourse structure: the ordering, selection, and framing of information across a text can generate scalar implicatures, manner implicatures, and relevance-based inferences that substantially enrich the communicated content beyond its literal propositional value (Levinson, 1983).

Conventional implicature — a concept introduced by Grice (1975) and developed by Potts (2005) — refers to meaning that is conventionally encoded in a linguistic expression but does not contribute to its truth-conditional content. Discourse connectives such as 'but', 'even', and 'after all' carry conventional implicatures that signal the speaker's evaluative stance toward the propositional content they link. The analysis of conventional implicature in text has important implications for the study of argumentative and evaluative discourse, where the selection of connectives is a key resource for framing and persuasion.

4.2 Presupposition

Presupposition — the information that an utterance takes for granted as already established in the common ground — is a particularly important pragmatic phenomenon in text analysis. Presuppositions are not asserted but assumed, and they survive under negation and in questions: the utterance 'John has stopped smoking' presupposes that John smoked, whether the utterance is affirmed, denied, or questioned. In extended texts, presuppositions function as a powerful rhetorical and argumentative device: by presupposing rather than asserting controversial or ideologically loaded propositions, text producers can introduce them into the discourse without subjecting them to direct challenge (van Dijk, 1993).

The projection of presuppositions through complex sentences and across discourse units — what Karttunen (1974) termed the 'projection problem' — is one of the central technical challenges in the formal analysis of presupposition. Accommodation theory (Lewis, 1979) proposes that hearers who encounter an unfamiliar presupposition will, under normal circumstances, accommodate it into the common ground rather than reject it, a process that has significant implications for the study of how new information is introduced into discourse and how background assumptions are shaped by textual framing.

4.3 Speech Acts in Text

Speech act theory was originally developed to analyse individual utterances, but its extension to the level of text has generated a rich body of research on how illocutionary acts are sequenced, embedded, and organized in discourse. Texts are not simply collections of independent speech acts; they are structured sequences in which the illocutionary force of individual utterances is conditioned by their position within the larger communicative purpose of the text. Swales's (1990) genre analysis framework, for example, analyses academic texts in terms of 'moves' — recognizable communicative actions that contribute to the overall rhetorical purpose of the genre — and shows how the macro-level speech act of the text is realized through a structured sequence of micro-level acts.

Indirect speech acts — cases where the illocutionary force of an utterance differs from its syntactic form — are particularly common in texts where politeness, face-saving, or institutional constraints shape the expression of communicative intentions. The interpretation of indirect acts in text requires the integration of semantic content with pragmatic reasoning about the speaker's intentions and the norms of the communicative situation, illustrating once again the inseparability of semantic and pragmatic analysis.

4.4 Intertextuality

Intertextuality — the property of texts by virtue of which they explicitly or implicitly refer to, echo, or transform other texts — is a phenomenon that straddles the boundary between semantics and pragmatics. At the semantic level, intertextual references create webs of meaning that extend beyond the individual text; at the pragmatic level, they function as a communicative resource through which text producers invoke shared cultural knowledge, establish authority, signal affiliation, or engage in ideological positioning (Kristeva, 1980; Fairclough, 1992).

The analysis of intertextuality in text requires attention to both the semantic content of the referenced texts and the pragmatic functions served by the act of reference. Allusions, quotations, parody, and generic conventions all exploit intertextual relations to achieve communicative effects that would be impossible through the resources of a single, self-contained text. The study of intertextuality thus highlights the social and cultural embeddedness of textual meaning — the way in which texts are always produced and interpreted against a background of prior texts and communicative practices.

5. Toward an Integrated Account of Text Meaning

The foregoing survey of key concepts in text semantics and text pragmatics has revealed a consistent pattern: the phenomena that are most revealing of how meaning works in texts are precisely those that cannot be adequately analysed from within either domain alone. Coherence is both a semantic property — dependent on the propositional content of textual units and the relations between them — and a pragmatic achievement — dependent on the interpreter's ability to apply contextual knowledge and inferential processes to construct a unified discourse model. Presupposition involves both semantic triggers — the linguistic expressions that encode presuppositional content — and pragmatic processes of accommodation and projection that determine how presuppositions interact with the common ground. Implicature arises at the interface between what is encoded semantically and what is inferred pragmatically. Intertextuality involves both semantic content (what is being referenced) and pragmatic function (why it is being referenced and what effects this achieves).

This pattern suggests that the theoretical separation of semantics and pragmatics, while analytically useful, reflects a methodological convenience rather than a principled division in the structure of meaning itself. The meaning of a text is not the sum of its semantic content plus its pragmatic enrichment; rather, semantic and pragmatic processes are mutually constitutive, each shaping and constraining the other in ways that make their interaction the proper object of study. This view is consistent with the position of theorists such as Recanati (2004), who argues for a 'truth-conditional pragmatics' in which pragmatic processes penetrate into the very determination of propositional content, and with the dynamic semantic frameworks of Heim (1982) and Kamp (1981), in which semantic interpretation is a context-dependent, incremental process sensitive to the discourse structures that pragmatic processing builds.

An integrated approach to text meaning has several practical advantages. It allows analysts to account for the full range of textual phenomena without arbitrarily assigning borderline cases to one domain or the other. It enables a more principled analysis of rhetorical and argumentative structure, in which the deployment of semantic resources — choice of lexis, syntactic construction, propositional content — is understood in terms of its pragmatic effects — what it does in context, how it positions the text producer and the reader, what inferences it licenses or forecloses. And it provides a richer basis for applications in language teaching, translation, and computational text analysis, where the ability to reason about the interplay of encoded and inferred meaning is essential.

The development of such an integrated framework is one of the most important challenges facing contemporary linguistics and discourse studies. Recent work in cognitive linguistics (Langacker, 1987; Talmy, 2000), construction grammar (Goldberg, 1995), and interactional linguistics (Couper-Kuhlen & Selting, 2018) has begun to address this challenge by developing models of meaning that are inherently context-sensitive and that treat the boundary between semantic and pragmatic knowledge as gradient rather than sharp. The field of text linguistics stands to benefit greatly from these developments, as they provide theoretical tools that are commensurate with the complexity of the phenomena that text analysis must address.

6. Discussion: Implications for Linguistic Theory and Applied Research

The theoretical arguments developed in the preceding sections have a number of significant implications for both linguistic theory and applied research. For linguistic theory, the most important implication is that a satisfactory account of textual meaning requires a

model of grammar that is not merely sentence-grammar extended to longer units, but a genuinely text-level theory in which the organizational principles of discourse — topical structure, rhetorical relations, referential architecture, speech act sequencing — are treated as grammatically real categories that interact with and constrain the application of sentence-level semantic rules.

For applied linguistics and language pedagogy, the integrated perspective on text semantics and pragmatics suggests that the teaching of reading and writing skills should go beyond the development of grammatical competence and vocabulary knowledge to encompass what has been variously described as discourse competence (Canale & Swain, 1980), pragmatic competence (Leech, 1983), or textual competence (Halliday, 1994) — the ability to produce and interpret texts as coherent communicative acts in socially and culturally situated contexts. This implies a pedagogy that attends to genre conventions, rhetorical organization, implicature recognition, and the pragmatics of written communication, not merely to the surface-level correctness of sentences.

For translation studies, the interdependence of semantics and pragmatics at the text level underscores the inadequacy of word-for-word or sentence-by-sentence translation strategies. A text is not simply a container of propositional content that can be transferred intact from one language to another; it is a pragmatic act performed within a specific cultural and communicative context, and its meaning — including its implicatures, presuppositions, intertextual resonances, and speech act force — can only be adequately rendered by a translator who attends to all of these dimensions simultaneously. The analysis of translation equivalence must therefore be conducted at the level of text and discourse, not merely at the level of sentence or word (Hatim & Mason, 1990).

For computational linguistics and natural language processing, the integrated view of text meaning highlights the limitations of approaches that treat semantic parsing and pragmatic inference as separate pipeline stages. The phenomena discussed in this article — coherence, presupposition, implicature, indirect speech acts — all require the integration of linguistic knowledge, world knowledge, and contextual reasoning in ways that resist modular decomposition. Recent advances in large-scale neural language models (Devlin et al., 2019; Brown et al., 2020) have demonstrated impressive performance on tasks that require implicit pragmatic reasoning, but the theoretical understanding of how such models represent and process the interplay of semantic and pragmatic information remains limited.

7. Conclusion

This article has examined text semantics and text pragmatics as two complementary and mutually dependent dimensions of the study of linguistic meaning. Through a review of the theoretical traditions that have shaped each field — from structural semantics and formal truth-conditional analysis to speech act theory, Gricean pragmatics, and relevance theory — and through the analysis of key concepts including coherence, cohesion, presupposition, implicature, referential chains, and intertextuality, the article has argued that the meaning of texts cannot be adequately accounted for from within either domain alone. Semantic content provides the encoded basis on which pragmatic inference operates; pragmatic context shapes and constrains the very determination of semantic content. The two are not complementary layers in a sequential processing model but mutually constitutive dimensions of a single, unified meaning-making process.

The integrated perspective advocated here is not merely a theoretical desideratum; it reflects the actual structure of textual communication, in which readers and listeners routinely

and effortlessly perform the remarkable cognitive feat of recovering rich, contextually appropriate meanings from the interaction of linguistic form, world knowledge, communicative convention, and situational context. Understanding how this process works — and how it can fail, in cases of miscommunication, ambiguity, or cross-cultural misunderstanding — is among the deepest and most practically significant questions that linguistics can address.

Future research in text semantics and text pragmatics will benefit from closer interdisciplinary collaboration with cognitive science, computational linguistics, and the social sciences. Experimental methods from psycholinguistics and cognitive neuroscience can shed light on the processing mechanisms that underlie the integration of semantic and pragmatic information in real time. Corpus-based methods can reveal the statistical regularities in how semantic and pragmatic resources are deployed across genres and registers. And the rapid development of computational models of natural language processing provides both a testing ground for theoretical hypotheses and a practical context in which the insights of text linguistics can find productive application.

The study of how meaning is constructed and communicated in language remains one of the most fundamental and endlessly fascinating challenges in the human sciences. Text semantics and text pragmatics, pursued in their full interdependence, stand at the heart of that challenge.

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