I. Semantics and Metasemantics

1. Semantics focuses on modeling representational meaning, and in particular, the meaning of language. (Thick vs. thin semantics) Metasemantics focuses on mapping the conceptual space within which semantic theories are constructed; in particular, metasemantics focuses on analyzing and relating concepts like reference, truth, utterances, anaphora, definition, etc.

1. The relationship here is analogous to the relationship between, say, biology and the philosophy of biology. This suggests the question: is semantics a science?

1. There are certainly scientific approaches to semantics (e.g., SDRT, Relevance Theory), where structures and processes are identified as responsible for semantic phenomena.

2. But there are still serious, fundamental questions that threaten scientific progress, such as “What is the nature of language?” and “What is the role of the world in the science of meaning?”

3. This suggests that perhaps the more appropriate analogy would be with ethics and metaethics.

2. The issue here is one of demarcation—how do you distinguish between semantics and metasemantics? The domain is not sufficiently developed at this time to support a consensual answer to this question.

B. Semantics

1. Semantics is the focus of philosophy of language, as we noted, but it is also a sub-discipline of linguistics. This suggests that there are competing views about the way it should be handled. Is there
fundamental conceptual work to do, or are we in a position to begin the project of empirical modeling?

2. Philosophers believe that there is conceptual work to be done when dealing with specific languages. In particular, there would appear to be normative constraints on what counts as correct semantic description. Philosophers argue for specific conditions, serving these up as conditions of adequacy on semantic theories. The first two are principles of *formal correctness*, while the second two are principles of *material correctness*.

1. **Principle of Compositionality**: an acceptable ToM must “give an account of how the meanings of sentences depend upon the meanings of words” (Davidson). *Argument:* We learn languages, which is to say that we master a finite vocabulary and in the process acquire a capability that exhibits the property of “discrete infinity”; this would be an absolute mystery unless our capability exhibits the property of compositionality; thus, we must cleave to compositionality if we are to explain our ability to learn language.

2. **Principle of the Relevance of Truth**: given that sentences express truths, an acceptable ToM must at least accommodate this; at most, it should explain how it is that truth relates to meaning, and why it is that sentences express truths. *And* it must avoid antinomies such as the liar.

3. **Principle of Soundness**: an acceptable ToM must generate meanings for only the meaningful sentences in a language.

4. **Principle of Completeness**: an acceptable ToM must generate meanings for all the meaningful sentences in a language.

1. **Metasemantics**

1. An important consideration is the degree to which semantic consideration should be empirical as opposed to conceptual. It is worth noting that any scientist, no matter how applied, can bump up against conceptual questions. In this case, it would appear that there is reason to expect work for both the philosopher and the scientist. (Compare and constrast this with the project of accounting for any other human system.)
2. The conceptual side of metasemantics resolves into *metaphysical* considerations and *epistemic* considerations.

1. We can illuminate the metaphysical side with the help of two questions:

   1. *What are linguistic representations?* Is language a set of abstract representations or cognitive states? Are words or sentences the primary semantic building blocks?

   2. *What explains the fact that linguistic representations are meaningful?* Is it association with meanings? Is it through their use? (The economy of human interaction.)

2. We can get at the epistemic side with these questions:

   1. *In what does our knowledge of linguistic meanings consist?* Is it “know that” or “know how”?

   2. *How do we come to know linguistic meanings?* Does the fact that we can learn these militate against Platonic approaches?

   3. *How do we use our semantic knowledge?* We produce and interpret significant utterances reflexively—how is this done?

3. We must also be sensitive to results produced along the empirical dimension, in linguistics, psychology, and neuroscience. This includes results from the following two sources of semantically relevant data:

   1. Facts about how natural languages are actually used by members of the relevant speech communities.

   2. The semantic intuitions of those who speak the languages.

1. **Modeling Linguistic Meaning**

   1. There are alternative strategies one can adopt here that are symbiotic, but
their employment requires a context:

1. **The Metasemantic Strategy:** Lay bare the central semantic concepts and their interrelations, creating a conceptual framework for understanding semantic phenomena. – Grice, e.g.

2. **The Semantic Strategy:** Assign a meaning to every meaningful sentence in the language. – Davidson, e.g.

2. One such context is *interpersonal communication*. Consider an episode in which a two people are conversing, one in a chair (S) and one by an open window (L). At some time \( t \) during the conversation, S utters the sentence, “I’m cold”, intending to cause L to shut the window.

A. Focus first on S, and in particular on her thoughts. At the time \( S \) utters the sentence, she is in a certain overall cognitive state marked by the presence of cognitive representations.

1. These cognitive representations are related in complicated ways to the world, being effects of worldly causes, causal factors of effects in the world, and representations of the way the world is or might be.

2. They *structure* the experience for \( S \), framing her contributions and her interpretations. Within this overall state, there are specific representations that motivate \( S \) to utter the sentence, “I’m cold.”

3. These particular representations *trigger* the utterance. The speaker’s thoughts, then, causally influence her verbal performance in two different but related ways.

4. In addition, the sentence uttered can be seen as *expressing* the content of certain thoughts that figure into the triggering cause of the utterance.

B. Second, consider the sentence uttered. This sentence, like the thoughts that led to its production, stands in a complex relationship to the world. The overall meaning of the sentence as uttered on this occasion is influenced by each of these relationships.

1. First, there is what we can call *sentential meaning*, or the conventional meaning that is associated with the sentence
type and so follows it from utterance to utterance. In this case, the sentential meaning is given by something like, *<The speaker of this sentence> is cold at <the time of the utterance>*. Here, the utterance meaning is given by something like *S is cold at t*.

3. Finally, there is the *speaker meaning*, or the meaning the speaker intended the listener to take from the utterance in that context. In this episode, the speaker meaning would be given by something like, *S is cold at t and S wants L to close the window*.

C. Finally, we turn to the listener. *L* receives the utterance, processing its semantic characteristics below the level of consciousness.

1. This is done against a background of cognitive states that structure the process for *L*.

2. As *L* interprets the utterance, she will likely aim to determine what *S* intended by the remark, assuming he wishes to remain a party to the conversation.

3. In the context as described, *L* will likely take it to be an implicit request and do so without even thinking about it, leaving him with a decision to make about closing the window.

4. Here we have a successful episode: *S* has intended *L* to understand her needs by way of her utterance, and *L* has understood them.

D. One way to develop semantic theory is to begin with this model as a foundation and then construct a theory that explains the nature of its various elements and the relationships among them.

1. To be adequate, though, the theory must of course extend beyond this one episode. In the course of theory construction,
it will be necessary to consider a wide variety of additional episodes, both successful and pathological, that involve a range of sentences, discourse contexts, and participants.

2. Among the semantic complexities to be addressed are issues of compositionality, quantification, scope, modality, singular reference, and propositional attitude contexts.

3. The assumption behind investigations into the meaning of natural language is that nomological principles bring the richly varied data into systematic connection, supporting explanatory generalizations at the level of specific languages and at the level of language in general. The modest aim of semantic theory is the identification of these principles and the generalizations they support.