

# A Hybrid Approach to the Study of Meaning: Integrating Semantics, Pragmatics and Discourse Analysis

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## Abstract

The study of meaning has traditionally been divided into three major linguistic domains: semantics, pragmatics, and discourse analysis. While semantics focuses on literal meaning, pragmatics emphasizes contextual interpretation, and discourse analysis investigates meaning beyond the sentence level, these fields are often treated independently in linguistic instruction and research. This article argues for a hybrid analytical framework that integrates these three domains in order to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of meaning construction. Drawing on qualitative case-based discourse analysis and documentary review, the study examines naturally occurring utterances from English and Swahili contexts. The findings demonstrate that neither semantic nor pragmatic analysis alone sufficiently explains how meaning is produced, interpreted, or negotiated. Instead, meaning emerges through the interaction of lexical meaning, contextual inference, cultural awareness, and discourse organization. The paper further highlights the pedagogical implications of adopting a hybrid model in higher education, particularly in multilingual contexts. It concludes that an integrated approach enhances analytical depth, prevents interpretive reductionism, and better reflects the dynamic nature of communication.

**Keywords:** *Semantics, Pragmatics, Discourse Analysis, Meaning Construction, Hybrid Approach, Context, Culture.*

## Résumé

L'étude du sens a traditionnellement été divisée en trois grands domaines linguistiques : la sémantique, la pragmatique et l'analyse du discours. Alors que la

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sémantique se concentre sur le sens littéral, la pragmatique met l'accent sur l'interprétation contextuelle et l'analyse du discours examine le sens au-delà de la phrase. Ces domaines sont souvent traités de manière indépendante dans l'enseignement et la recherche linguistiques.

Cet article propose un cadre analytique hybride qui intègre ces trois domaines afin d'atteindre une compréhension plus complète de la construction du sens. S'appuyant sur une analyse qualitative de discours basée sur des cas ainsi que sur une revue documentaire, l'étude examine des énoncés authentiques issus de contextes anglophones et swahiliphones.

Les résultats montrent que ni l'analyse sémantique ni l'analyse pragmatique, prises isolément ne suffisent à expliquer comment le sens est produit, interprété ou négocié. Au contraire, le sens émerge de l'interaction entre le sens lexical, l'inférence contextuelle, la conscience culturelle et l'organisation du discours.

L'article met également en évidence les implications pédagogiques de l'adoption d'un modèle hybride dans l'enseignement supérieur, en particulier dans les contextes multilingues. Il conclut qu'une approche intégrée renforce la profondeur analytique, évite le réductionnisme interprétatif et reflète mieux la nature dynamique de la communication.

**Mots-clés :** *Sémantique, Pragmatique, Analyse du discours, Construction du sens, Approche hybride, Contexte, Culture.*

## **I. Introduction**

The question of how meaning is constructed and interpreted has occupied linguists for decades. Within a modern linguistic theory, the three major domains that address meaning from different perspectives are: semantics, pragmatics and discourse analysis. Despite their shared concern with meaning, these linguistic fields are frequently presented as separate disciplines in both theoretical research and classroom instruction. This separation often leads students to analyze texts in isolation – either focusing strictly on literal meaning, contextual inference, or textual organization – without recognizing their interdependence.

Acknowledging this difficulty faced by students of linguistics and in an attempt to overcome it, Makasi (2021, p.7) points out:

The terms semantics and pragmatics have been controversial for a long period since they have been understood and used in different ways by different people. So, students of linguistics are sometimes in confusion about them. As both fields deal with meaning, we should expect them to be complementary rather than independent.

At the end of his argumentative discussion, the researcher concludes that, in view of the similarities and dissimilarities between semantics and pragmatics, the two branches are complementary rather than contradictory.

The present study shares neither the view of scholars who look at semantics and pragmatics as independent branches nor of those who see them as purely complementary since neither of the two branches fills the gaps of the other. Moreover, rather than limiting the discussion to semantics and pragmatics, the study extends it to discourse analysis, the third linguistic field also related to meaning.

The study suggests a hybrid approach that recognizes the interconnected nature of the three linguistic domains. Briefly speaking, pragmatics, semantics and discourse analysis are regarded neither as strictly independent, nor as entirely complementary. In other terms, the three branches are neither entirely separate, nor strictly overlapping, but rather they interact in a way that integrates aspects of each of the three branches' viewpoint to co-create meaning. The following questions guide the research discussion:

- What are semantics, pragmatics and discourse analysis and what are their respective contribution to meaning?
- How do semantics, pragmatics and discourse analysis interact to co-create meaning?

The study employs a qualitative, case-based discourse analysis approach. It focuses on the semantic and pragmatic interpretation of naturally occurring discourse-bound utterances. A few examples of such utterances are analyzed thoroughly throughout the discussion to illustrate different arguments. The analytical procedure follows three stages: semantic analysis (examination of lexical meaning, semantic features, and structural composition); pragmatic analysis (exploration of contextual meaning, speaker intention,

implicature, and sometimes cultural framing); discourse analysis (evaluation of cohesion, coherence, ideology, and power relations).

The paper revolves respectively around the two research questions mentioned above and winds up with a pedagogical implication, a brief discussion of the results and a conclusion.

## **II. Definition of semantics, pragmatics, discourse analysis and their respective contribution to meaning.**

This section of the paper provides a definition of each of the three linguistic branches before discussing their respective contribution to meaning.

### **1. Semantics**

#### **➤ Definition**

The word 'semantics' is given different definitions by different people. Yule (2020, p.128), for instance, defines semantics as a branch of linguistics dealing with the meaning of words, phrases and sentences. It often deals with the meaning of words either in isolation or in combination according to grammar rules, and Yule (2020), indeed, distinguishes between referential meaning and associative or emotive meaning. While the former refers to the direct dictionary-like meaning of a word, such as rose meaning a type of flower with petals, thorns, and a stem, the latter is about various associations or connotations that a word may evoke, which can differ from person to person. For instance, 'rose' might evoke feelings of love, romance, beauty, passion, or even sadness or pain, depending on the individual's experiences.

In the same line of ideas, Sendihe, W.N. (2020, p.4) defines semantics as «the study of the meaning of words (lexical semantics), the meaning of fixed word combinations (phraseology) and how these combine to form the meanings of sentences. »

For Gaynor, F. and Pei, M (1980, p.193), « semantics refers to the relations between referents and referends-linguistic symbols (words, expressions, phrases) and the objects or concepts to which they refer- and with the history and changes in the meanings of words.»

According to the french linguists Moeschler, J. and Auchlin, A (2000, p.18), semantics is defined as « la signification des mots, des groupes de mots et des phrases, indépendamment des informations fournies par la situation ou le contexte extra-

linguistique. ». Although differently termed, the definitions above converge. All of them stress the word-meaning diadic relation as the concern of semantics. They confirm Yule's (2020) assertion that in semantics, focus is on what the words literally mean regardless of the context.

➤ *Semantics and meaning*

Semantics uses a set of strategies to literally convey meaning. These strategies include homonymy (words with different meanings, but same spelling or pronunciation), polysemy (words with various related meanings), antonymy (opposite meanings, antonyms may be relational, gradable, complementary), synonymy (identical or nearly same meanings), hyperonymy (superordinate) and hyponymy (a more general term including the meanings of hyponyms ; meaning of one word is included in another), paraphrasing, semantic features (basic units of meaning that differentiate words and break them into features such as +, -), meronymy and holonymy (the words denoting parts or constituents of a whole ; holonym is a word that relates to the whole to which the parts belong), etc.

As Kearns, K (2011) explains, semantics deals with what the words literally mean and how they are combined. In his approach to word meaning, he distinguishes between categoremic and syncategoremic words. Categoremic implies the descriptive words such as nouns, adjectives, and verbs. These expressions are called so because their descriptive content, or sense, provides a basis for categorization. For example, the description of the word 'architect' provides the basis for forming the category of architects ; the sense of the adjective 'minimalist' provides the basis for the category of minimalist designs ; the sense of the word 'wild' provides for categories of wild animals, things, etc. Categoremic words are said to carry independent meaning and can be classified focusing on their descriptive content.

Syncategoremic words, on the other hand, are words that are not self-dependent in meanings and help, instead, to link or modify categoremic words. Examples of these are words like some, because, if, since, and, etc. They require context to be meaningful. Semantics is concerned with both categoremic and syncategoremic words since it deals with the meaning of the sentence considering not only what individual words mean within a sentence, but also the semantic roles these words fulfil in the sentence for literally conveying meanings.

Lexemes like nouns, verbs, adjectives within a sentence are termed *categoremic*. They contribute significantly to meaning, not only through their literal intrinsic meanings but also by showing what is being said and spoken about, what is occurring, what is the appearance, the taste, the temperature, the age, etc. of the things talked about. To illustrate this, the following sentences may be considered :

- i. My friend ate a red apple yesterday
- ii. John saw his brother kill a snake with a stone.

In the first sentence, *categoremic* words are ‘friend’, ‘ate’, ‘red’, ‘yesterday’, and ‘apple.’ Each of these words fulfils a semantic role in the sentence : ‘ate’ shows what happened, i.e. the event or the action involved in the sentence ; ‘friend’ and ‘apple’ explain the roles of the entities involved in the action, ‘friend’ being the agent of the action, and ‘apple’ the theme or patient ; ‘red’ describes the appearance of the apple and ‘yesterday’ is the temporal deixis ; it indicates the time of the event.

In sentence 2, *categoremic* words are John, saw, brother, kill, snake, and stone. Each of these words also fulfils a semantic role: ‘John’ is the experiencer ; ‘saw’ and ‘kill’ respectively describe the experience and the event evoked in the sentence ; ‘brother’ is the agent, ‘snake’ the theme or patient and ‘stone’ the instrument used by the agent to perform the activity or the action. In short, semantics leans both on the individual words’ meanings and their semantic roles to convey meaning.

*Syncategoremic* expressions consist of prepositions, conjunctions, articles, and determiners, pronouns, auxiliary verbs, modal verbs, negation words, quantifiers and *partitives*, logical operators and relational words. All these also contribute to literal meaning. This idea is clearly expressed by Bierwisch M and Heidolph K. E (1970, p. 27) when they assert that « the meaning of a given sentence can be accounted for on the basis of the words or, more precisely, the dictionary entries of which it consists, and the syntactic relations connecting these items.»

Prepositions indicate the relation between words; conjunctions connect words or phrases to express the relation between them; they may also connect clauses to denote the relation between ideas. Articles and determiners specify nouns; pronouns substitute nouns, auxiliary verbs help conjugate verbs to locate events in time or to denote verb

aspect (perfective or imperfective), and modals modify verbs' actions to show their possibility, necessity, etc. Negation words negate actions or events, quantifiers and partitives indicate amounts or part of a whole while logical and relational words express logical relations. The following sentences may be used to illustrate the contribution of some syncategoremic words to sentence meaning:

- i. The doctor went precipitately to hospital because there was an emergency case.
- ii. The doctor went to hospital after he had eaten.
- iii. The doctor might go to hospital in the morning.

In the first sentence, syncategoremic words are 'the', 'to', 'because', 'an'. The use of 'the' to determine the categoremic word 'doctor' denotes that he (the doctor) is known to both the speaker and the hearer. The preposition 'to' links the verb to the word 'hospital' to show the direction of the movement expressed by the verb. 'Because' joins two clauses to show that there is relation of cause and effect between the ideas expressed by the two clauses. 'An' determines 'emergency case' to specify the number of emergency cases.

The conjunction 'after' in the second sentence shows the chronological order of the actions 'went' and 'eaten' while the auxiliary 'had' denotes not only perfectiveness but also anteriority of the action of eating when compared to that of going.

The modal auxiliary in sentence 3 shows uncertainty of the action.

It appears from the examples above that in their contribution to literal meaning, syncategoremic words connect, modify or determine categoremic words, but they cannot describe events or realities on their own.

Semantics also resorts to semantic features to express meaning. For instance, a word like 'sheep' can be broken down into smaller units of meaning called 'semantic features'. These features can be classified into ontological features (+ animal, + mammal), physical or morphological features (+ ovine, +wooly, +four-legged or quadrupedal), functional or utility features (+domesticated, + resourceful), behavioral features (+ gregarious, +defenseless, + grazing), relational features (+ adult, + female), connotative features (following, timidity, innocence). These features (put together) may serve to distinguish the word 'sheep' from other words like 'goat', 'lamb', 'boy', etc.

## 2. Pragmatics

### ➤ *Definition*

Like the term ‘semantics’, pragmatics is defined differently by different people. Sendihe, W.N. (2020, p.4) defines it as « the study of how utterances are used literally or figuratively, or otherwise in communicative acts depending on the context (language in context). ». Mwanditsi, N.P. (2022, p.10) gives a similar definition and states:

Pragmatics is a subfield of linguistics that examines how language is used in context and the role of context in shaping meaning during communication. It focuses on the study of language in action, encompassing the social, cultural, and psychology factors that influence communication beyond the literal meaning of words.

Levinson’s (1983) as cited by Mwanditsi (2022, p.10) expresses the same idea. He explains that pragmatics is the study of the relation between language and context and explicitly states: « Pragmatics is the study of those relations between language and context that are grammatical, or encoded in the structure of a language. ». Tembue (2022, p.1) provides a further definition of pragmatics saying:

Pragmatics is a subfield of linguistics which studies the ways in which context contributes to meaning. It studies how the transmission of meaning depends not only on linguistic knowledge (e.g. grammar, lexicon, etc.) of the speaker and listener, but also on the context of the utterance, knowledge about the status of those involved, the inferred intent of the speaker, and so on. In this respect, pragmatics explains how language users are able to overcome apparent ambiguity, since meaning relies on the manner, place, time, etc. of an utterance. The ability to understand another speaker’s intended meaning is called pragmatic competence. An utterance describing pragmatic function is described as metapragmatic.

All the definitions above indicate that pragmatics is concerned, not with what people say, but what they mean by their utterances in a given context. In other terms, it deals with what is implied, although not actually said. When speakers communicate, they have to take into account shared assumptions and expectations in order to arrive at the invisible meaning (Yule, G. 2020). In other terms, pragmatics progresses beyond what is literally conveyed by speakers. In view of what precedes, Kreidler, C.W. (2014, pp.11-12), defines pragmatics as :

A person’s ability to get meanings from specific situations – to recognize what a speaker is referring to, to relate new information to what has gone before, to interpret what is being said from background knowledge about

the sepeaker and the topic, and to infer or ‘fill in’ information that the speaker takes for granted and doesn’t bother to say. (sic)

So, unlike semantic meaning which is diadic, pragmatic meaning is triadic (Words, context, meaning)

➤ *Pragmatics and meaning*

As does semantics, pragmatics uses a variety of strategies to convey meaning. Among these strategies, mention can be made of speech acts, turn-taking, implicature, presupposition, deixis, politeness principle, etc. Pragmatics deals with how individuals use and interpret linguistic signs in real-life communication. In other words, it is employed in interpersonal meaning and it is particularly concerned with the hearer’s meaning, that is the meaning that the listener makes of an utterance (Mulamba, 2015). It leans on the context of the utterance. It is, however, worth mentioning that the notion of context is a multidimensional term, as noted by Schumacher, P. B. and Meeibauer, R. F.(2012, p.11). According to them, dimensions of context are :

Intratextual (co-text) : the relation of a piece of text to its surrounding text ;  
Infratextual : the relation of a piece of text to the whole of the text ;  
Intertextual : the relation of a text to other texts ;  
extratextual (situational context) : the relation of a text to aspects of the situation in which the text has been produced or interpreted.

Pragmatics is more concerned with the last type of context, also called ‘communicative context’ since it refers to the situation in which an utterance is produced. Scholars support the view that this context encompasses both the speaker and the hearer, the writer and the reader, as well as the communicative act itself, situated in time and space. (see Schumacher, P. B and Meibauer, R.F. (2012, p.11). Pragmatics leans on the contextual meaning of a word, phrase, or sentence i.e. the specific situation in which it is used by the speaker. Contrary to the literal definitions of words in the dictionary, contextual meaning relies on factors such as : who is speaking, to whom, where and when it is said, the cultural or social background, what has already been said (discourse context). Examples below can illustrate the case :

- i. Can you pass the salt ?
- ii. She didn’t come back to see me !
- iii. I’m going to the bank.

In the first instance, the word ‘can’ literally entails ability. Semantically, the speaker is asking if the listener has the ability to pass the salt. Nevertheless, pragmatically, the speaker’s utterance does not refer to the person’s ability or capacity of bringing the salt ; it is, instead, a polite request. To get a correct understanding of this, the hearer has to lean on extratextual or situational context. The speaker and the hearer are, surely, sharing a meal. The salt is on the table; it is close to the listener, but not at the reach of the speaker. Since the intended meaning depends on extratextual context, meaning here is ruled by pragmatic and not semantic analysis.

Semantically, the second sentence refers to someone who failed to return to see the speaker. Pragmatically, however, this might be a signal that the speaker is upset or disappointed because the person spoken about was expected to call on the speaker, but he/she did not. The speaker’s tone and the relationship between him/her and the hearer, two components of the extratextual context, may indicate whether this utterance is a simple factual information or an expression of frustration or regret. Understanding here is also ruled by pragmatic analysis since it depends on situational context.

In the third sentence, the situation is different. The sentence structure is simple ; it is the word ‘bank’ that is challenging because it is prone to multiple meanings. It can refer to a financial institution, the side of a river, or a store of knowledge. So, we are concerned here with a case of homonymy, a semantic phenomenon. Whether it is semantics or pragmatics that is concerned will depend on the facilitating context. If the utterance is, for example, addressed by a cashier to his/her financial manager, the context would suggest that the speaker is going to a financial institution for a bank operation. Since, comprehension would be facilitated by extratextual context, the sentence interpretation would be related to pragmatics and not to semantics. The situation would be different if the speaker said ‘I’m going to the bank to deposit some money. Here, the meaning of ‘bank’ would be clarified by intratextual context and not situational context, to mean that the interpretation would be regulated by semantics.

In sentences 1 and 3, meaning interpretation is related to single words, namely ‘can’ in sentence 1 and ‘bank’ in sentence 2. There are, however, cases where meaning interpretation is not concerned with single words, but with the speaker’s utterance as a whole. This can be illustrated by the following example:

A man coming from work meets his wife at the entrance gate of their home and the following conversation takes place:

Wife : Welcome, my love.

Husband : Thanks, honey.

Wife : I'm going out to pay a visit to a neighbour who is ill ; I'll be back in a few minutes.

Husband : I haven't eaten since morning.

Wife : Really ! I'm sorry. Let me serve you your meal before leaving.

Husband : That's kind.

In this conversation, the husband's statement 'I haven't eaten since morning' is not simply informing his wife of his physical state. Actually, the man is telling his wife, « How can you go out without giving me food while you know that I'm very hungry! Why can't you first give me food? »

His wife does understand this implicature; she apologizes and she decides to serve him his meal before leaving. What facilitates this mutual understanding is not the literal meaning of the words and their grammatical relations, but extratextual context. The man is usually served his meal by his wife when he comes from work and so he knows that the food is ready. The wife is also aware that it is her responsibility to serve him food. In a different context, the same utterance could have a different implicature.

Example: John, secretary and Peter, technician in charge of computer maintenance, are in their office. It is noon, i.e. break time. A conversation takes place as follows:

John: Peter, there is something wrong with my computer.

Peter: I haven't eaten since this morning, john.

John: All right, you'll check the computer after break.

In this conversation, Peter's statement 'I haven't eaten since morning' is not a request for food like in the preceding situation. Peter rather informs John that, as it is break time, he may let him go and have his lunch first. The context allows John to understand the implicature. And he says, 'you'll check the computer after break.' John knows that Peter usually has his lunch at break time. He allows Peter to go and eat before checking the

computer. Also, John's statement 'there is something wrong with my computer' is understood by Peter as a request for service thanks to the context.

These two examples clearly show that the same utterance can have different implicatures depending on the context (relationship between hearer and speaker, communication situation, tone, etc.). This is the concern of pragmatics; what people say does not always mean what is said literally.

### **3. Discourse analysis**

#### ➤ *Definition :*

Linguists define discourse as 'language beyond the sentence.' The study of discourse concerns, more particularly, the analysis of language in texts and in conversation. In other terms, it is the study of how sentences connect to form larger units of language such as conversations, paragraphs, arguments, speeches or narratives.

The difference between discourse analysis and discourse competence is worth mentioning. While discourse analysis concerns the study of language used in texts and conversations, discourse competence relates to a speaker's ability to produce and understand cohesive and coherent spoken or written language.

#### ➤ *Discourse analysis and meaning*

Discourse analysis looks at how meaning is built across sentences and how language is used in social contexts to perform actions. No matter how semantically or syntactically the words or phrases are organized within the utterance, a discourse may still be intelligible. Let us, for example, consider the phrase 'No money, no wife' used in a conversation. Although no verb is used, the listener will understand what it means: 'there is no way to get a wife if you do not have money' as often said by young people in Goma. Discourse analysis contributes to making a text meaningful even if it is incomplete or it has grammatical lacunae. The following example given by Eric Nelson in Yule's book (2020, p.168) contains faulty forms and grammatical lacunae, and yet it can be understood

My natal was in small town, very close to Riyadh capital of Saudi Arabia. The distant between my town and Riyadh 7 miles exactly. The name of this Almasani that means in English factories. It takes this name from the people's career. I remember the people live. It was very simple. Most the people was farmer.

The author states that rather than rejecting this text, language users can make sense of it. Discourse analysis competence allows language users to arrive at a meaningful interpretation of the speaker's message. Studying how language is used in dialogues, conversations, or long texts is the concern of discourse analysis. It focuses more particularly on the analysis of the structure of language beyond its syntactic level in various situations. The discourse analyst attempts to understand, not only the strategies used by the locutor or the writer to capture the listener's or reader's attention, but also coherence, cohesion, ideology, and power relations, etc. within a discourse.

### **i. Cohesion and coherence**

Cruse, A. (2006, p.27) reckons that « cohesion is a matter of form and concerns (mainly grammatical) ways of connecting one piece of language to another, such as subject-verb agreement and anaphora. Coherence is a matter of meaning compatibility and relevance. » Mbokani K. B. (2005, p.107) clarifies the distinction between coherence and cohesion when he writes: « in opposition to cohesion which concentrates solely on the connectivity of the surface text, coherence, which focuses on the connectivity of underlying semantic relations or concepts, plays a most important place in the pragmatic analysis and interpretation of literary texts. ». Cruse (2006) illustrates the difference through the following mini-tests;

- i. My father came into my room. So I plugged him in and switched him on.
- ii. There was a loud knock. I opened the door. Two policemen.

As he explains, Mini-text 1 is cohesive, but it lacks coherence while Mini-text 2 is short of clear indicators of cohesive devices, but is coherent.

In the first instance, in terms of cohesion, it can be noted that the two clauses constituting the Mini-text, are grammatically linked with the logical connector 'so', a causal connector which explicitly shows cohesion. As far as references are concerned, we have anaphoric reference because 'him' refers back to the phrase 'my father'. Concerning lexical cohesion, the words 'plugged in' and 'switched on' are cohesive group words that refer to electrical devices. So they constitute a cohesive pair of words; but when applied to people, they introduce semantic dissonance. Pragmatically, coherence is seen to be very

low; the reader will have to struggle to make sense of the speaker's meaning or logic unless context is given.

As far as the second example is concerned, it can be observed that there is a good sequential logic of events although no cohesion devices are used and in spite of the lack of a finite verb in the third component of the discourse. In discourse analysis terms, this part of the text is said to contain implicit ellipsis. The reader or the listener is, however, able to understand the logical sequence of events: knock – open – policemen appear. The sequence of events is meaningful and logical. Although the sentence contains some splices with minor grammar issues, the listener or reader may still understand the context of the utterance, make inference of the missing words and mentally complete the sentence.

## ii. Ideology in discourse analysis

Ideology plays an important role in discourse. It reveals the beliefs, values, and assumptions that shape how people perceive the world's realities. Ideologies serve as core structures through which members of the community or social groups organize their understanding of the world and establish their social position among other groups. These ideologies are often highlighted through lexical choices, grammatical rules, metaphors, and narrative framing.

So, different lexical choices may present the same societal patterns in opposing ideological terms. For instance, the phrases *economic migrants* and *asylum seekers*. Both refer to people crossing borders; however, they may carry different ideologies depending on the speaker's perception about those people. In comparing these two terms, the former may imply voluntary economic movement, while the latter suggest humanitarian protection and political displacement.

Ideology may also be encoded in grammatical structures. Consider the following newspaper headlines describing the same event:

- Government police killed rioters in the street
- Rioters were killed by government police in the street.

Although both sentences refer to the same event, the option between active and passive voice influences how responsibility and agency are perceived. Such linguistic phenomena may indicate the ideological stance of the media source reporting the event.

Consequently, discourse analysis looks into how linguistic structures lead to the construction of meaning, reproduction, and critique of ideological meanings within social groups or society.

### **iii. Power relation**

Power relation is often expressed through discourse. In social communication, not only is language used as a means of communication, but it may also be used to exercise, negotiate, and challenge power. According to Van Dijk, T.A. (2008, p.29) social power is “a property of the relationship between groups, classes or other social formations, or between persons as social members.” This implies that power is not merely a personal trait but a relational phenomenon that evolves from interactions between social stakeholders and groups. Van Dijk further explains that powerful groups often exercise authority over others and influence communication, which allows them to shape the knowledge, beliefs, and opinions of people. In turn taking, speech events or communicative acts, discourse may operate on two levels of influence. First, when the speaker holds authority, this may negatively affect the discourse by restricting the communicative rights of other participants.

Second, discourse may limit participants’ access to public discourse. In such situations, the public is prevented from freely expressing their views (Van Dijk, 2010). Similarly, in Discourse analysis, Social power can be understood as the ability of social groups or individuals to monitor the actions, knowledge, values, and influence beliefs of others. Such control is usually expressed through discourse, particularly in institutional environments such as schools, governments, courts and media outlets. In discourse and social interaction power operates in two ways: within discourse and behind discourse. In discourse, power refers to the ways interlocutors monitor turn-taking within communicative events, while power behind discourse involves the institutional hierarchies that determine who is allowed to speak, what can be said, and how it may be interpreted.

Power relations can be identified through several linguistic and interactional features. They embed directives and commands, turn-taking control, speech acts as criticism or evaluation, lexical selection that support authority and politeness clues that signal hierarchy.

For instance, in institutional settings such as schools, administrators, leaders, or managers usually use directive language to regulate behavior. The authority of school leaders enables them to define standards, issue instructions, and assess the actions of their subordinates. These linguistic behaviors indicate hierarchical relationships between participants in the discourse.

Discourse analysis therefore examines how language both reflects and reproduces social relations and hierarchies, patterns of authority, and institutional responsibilities. People invested with power have the right to give directions, to blame, to define behaviour standards for those over whom they exercise their power. *Identifying the impact of power relation in human interactions is one of the concerns of discourse analysis. They are also invested of the authority to speak on behalf others.*

Ideology and power, altogether, can be illustrated through the Congolese President's political speech concerning silent genocide in Congo. In this speech the president says: "The Democratic Republic of the Congo has been a victim of aggression and the international community must act to stop the violence in the east of our country."

This excerpt exemplifies a form of power, namely institutional power, where implicitly the president speaks on behalf of the country, "the Democratic Republic of the Congo". In this situation, Congo is used collectively to represent the entire nation's population. Within the discourse, the president calls on international community to fulfill its duty when he states that "the international community must act." The modal verb *must* signals obligation, and creates a sense of duty for international political actors to defend the citizens of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Concerning ideology, the discourse also involves the representation of social actors. These actors are presented in two main ways: positive *self-presentation* and *negative other-presentation*. The Democratic Republic of the Congo is depicted as an innocent victim through the president's statement that "the DRcongo has been a victim of aggression." The same statement incorporates negative other-presentation, where the president highlights that the country is experiencing aggression and violence.

## **II. Interaction of semantics, pragmatics and discourse analysis to co-create meaning**

Semantics, pragmatics and discourse analysis are not mutually exclusive; they often co-apply to an utterance and interact to co-create meaning.

### **1. Co-application of semantics, pragmatics and discourse analysis**

An utterance can be analyzed simultaneously in terms of semantics, pragmatics and discourse analysis. Let us, for example consider the following example where a school headteacher is talking to teachers: « As responsible teachers, you must support the school's effort in maintaining discipline, enforcing the school regulations within your classes. You shouldn't tolerate indiscipline. »

#### **➤ *Semantic analysis***

Literally, the headteacher states that it is a duty of 'responsible teachers' to support the school actions related to discipline and regulations. The choice of words within this part of the discourse is made carefully to express the speaker's intention. Words like 'responsible', 'support', 'effort', and 'regulations', 'discipline', and 'indiscipline' are carefully selected to hold the teachers' attention.

#### **➤ *Pragmatic analysis***

In accordance with the implied meaning, the speaker believes that 'being responsible' involves contribution to the school policy implementation. Indirectly, the headteacher is criticizing those teachers who are not supporting and enforcing the school's regulations, qualifying them as irresponsible. Depending on his/her voice tone, this part of the discourse may be interpreted as a sensitization of the teachers to get involved in the school's regulations implementation or even a threat.

#### **➤ *Discourse analysis***

Discourse features like coherence, cohesion, ideology, power relation, etc. can be identified in the headteacher's speech.

#### ***i. Cohesion and coherence***

This part of the headteacher's speech is cohesive because the speaker respects lexical cohesion. Words like 'teacher', 'school', 'regulation', 'discipline', 'class',

‘indiscipline’ belong to the same field, namely school governance. The speech is also coherent since it follows a logical structure. It stresses responsible teachers’ role showing first what they must do and then what they should not do. Moreover, this address to the teachers is to be placed in a larger discourse where the headteacher has just pointed out cases of indiscipline at the school.

### *ii. Ideology*

The headteacher’s speech reflects his/her ideology with regard to school education. For him/her, school should promote good education; and discipline can contribute to the achievement of this goal. As school is a place or an institution that should help learners serve as reference or models to society and become good citizens, it is seen as the protector of social standards, and so it should mirror society’s expectations for future generations. The headteacher indirectly expresses his/her agreement with Rabelais’ saying ‘Science without conscience is but ruin of the soul.’

### *iii. Power relation*

The speech reflects a top-down power structure. It assumes that the speaker has authority to define the obligations of responsible teachers. He/she exercises power on the teachers; he/she can criticize and give them directions with regard to the school policy. By telling the teachers what they should do and what they should not do, the speaker revendicates his/her right to punish them if they do not meet the school’s expectations.

## **III. Interaction of Semantics, pragmatics and discourse analysis in meaning co-creation**

In meaning co-creation, semantics provides the raw material. The words used by the speaker and their syntactic combination constitute the basic blocks of meaning. Leaning on these building blocks, pragmatics refines the meaning; and finally, discourse analysis ensures that the speaker’s words fit into the overall social interaction.

What precedes can be illustrated through a few examples;

Example 1. Conversation between A and B.

A : Hello Dear !

B : Hello !

A : How was your defense ?

B : Dear friend, it wasn't good at all ! I met a lion in my jury.

When analyzing the word 'lion' used in this conversation, leaning on semantic features, it can be noted that literally, the word meets the following features :

Semantic features of 'lion'	Meaning
+ animate	The lion is a living creature
+ animal	It belongs to the animal species
+ mammal	The lion gives birth to and breastfeeds young lions
+ feline	Lion is an hyponym belonging to the hypernym 'felidae'. Co-hyponyms of lion are tigers and leopards.
+ carnivore	They eat meat
+ predator	They hunt preys
+ wild	They do not stay home, but in the forest
+ strong	Lions are physically powerful
+ aggressive	They are ferocious and aggress other animals
+ roars	Their roars are noisy

The pragmatic meaning of 'lion' which is a metaphor here, is based on one of the semantic features of the word 'lion', namely the "+ aggressive" feature. This semantic feature remains a key determiner in the pragmatic interpretation of the metaphor. The aggressive feature of 'lion' is mapped onto the jury member, to mean that he was aggressive. Apart from the word 'lion', all the other words in the sentence 'I met a lion in my jury' keep their semantic meaning, and they all contribute to the overall sense of the utterance. Here, the interaction between semantics and pragmatics can be summed up as follows : semantics provides the building blocks of the meaning (deictic elements, basic action, time of the action, circumstance or in other terms, the answers to the questions who, what, when, where, in which circumstance ?) Pragmatics leans on these and on the + aggressive feature of 'lion' to determine and convey the speaker's intended meaning. Discourse analysis also does intervene in co-creating the utterance meaning. B's utterance 'I met a lion in my jury' is part of an ongoing conversation including common schema ; it coherently and cohesively fits in the conversation. The sentence makes sense within the whole discourse ; in isolation, it would hardly be understood by the addressee.

Example 2 : A lady (Suzan) walks into a messy kitchen, looks at the maidservant (Mary), points to a pile of dirty dishes and says : ‘You really are a pig, Mary.’

At the semantic level alone, the sentence is literally false ; Mary is a human being, not a farm animal (a pig here). But, similarly to the preceding example, semantics does provide the raw material or the basic building blocks of the meaning. Mary is being equated with a pig, which is literally false. But, in refining meaning, pragmatics leans on one of the semantic features of ‘pig’, an animal known to be dirty. The context allows the listener to understand the metaphor : the kitchen is messy ; Suzan is pointing to a pile of dirty dishes and the semantic feature of ‘dirtiness’ associated with the pig is being mapped onto Mary. Concerning the speech act involved in the utterance, other cues of context such as the voice tone and non-verbal or semiotic cues like facial expression would indicate whether the utterance is an insult, a joke or a sarcastic request to clean the kitchen and wash the dishes. If said with anger, the utterance would be a direct insult. But if said with a sigh and half smile, it might be a sarcastic and gentle prod to clean the kitchen and wash the dishes.

Concerning the contribution of discourse analysis to meaning co-creation in this example, Suzan’s utterance is to be placed in an ongoing relationship. There is an agreement between Suzan and Mary according to which keeping the kitchen tidy is Mary’s task. Mary is likely to have on several occasions failed to meet this clause of their agreement. The utterance also reflects power relation: Suzan exercises some authority on Mary. The utterance gets its full meaning only when placed in that situational discourse. Depending on the voice tone, Suzan could be said to exercise her authority either with humility or with arrogance.

Example 3 : John and Peter are waiting for a friend who is expected to come by car. As they are tired waiting along the road, they have the following conversation:

*Peter : I’m tired waiting and I think he will no longer come. Let’s go back home.*

*John : Listen, there is a car coming !*

The implicature of John’s utterance above is that they should be patient and go on waiting for a while. Semantics, pragmatics and discourse analysis interact to co-create this meaning. Semantics provides the foundation on which the implicature is built. If there were no car coming, there would not be any such implicature. In order to interpret the utterance,

Peter has to make an inference from what John says literally. Discourse analysis also has a role to play in that interpretation. In order to be understood, John's utterance needs to be placed in the overall conversation. The same utterance could carry a different meaning if the discourse were modified.

Example : Peter and Paul are waiting for their friend who is expected to come by car. They are tired waiting and they have the following conversation :

Peter : I'm tired standing here. Let's cross the road and sit in that hangar on the other side of the road.

John (as Peter is about to step onto the road) : Heh ! Look ! There is a car coming !

John's utterance 'there is a car coming !' here could be a request to pay attention and not step onto the road at that time. Surely, there are some elements of the situational context (voice tone, gesture) that contribute to the new interpretation ; the change in the discourse also does.

In some linguistic situations, cultural traits are part of the pragmatic context. As Pike, K. (1982), cited by Baha, asserts, « every culture has its own 'theories' – its cultural windows as ways of looking at the world as a set of universes of discourse... » This means that cultural traits are replicated even in language use and in human interactions. The following example provided by Baha (2015) may illustrate it :

At a party, here in Bukavu, they often say something like this : 'Aksanti kwa kuona mu me fika. Karibu sana/tena. Tu me pata kiazzi na kopo ya maji. Tu ta ichanga vile kwa upendo sawa vile watoto wa baba moja. Aksanti !

Literal translation suggests scarcity. Pragmatically, however, this discourse expresses humility and hospitality. Cultural knowledge stabilizes interpretation. Without pragmatic-cultural awareness, semantic translation would miss the speaker's intent.

Not taking into account cultural pragmatic meaning could lead participants to think that the speaker is being stingy, complaining about their large number and trying to exclude them in view of the insufficiency of the available food.

Yet, pragmatically, the speaker's style of speech signals humility, no aggrandization or glorification of self, warmth, sincerity, modesty, but not actual poverty. It also reflects inclusion, equality and gratitude.

#### **IV. Pedagogical implications**

In many school-classrooms, semantics, pragmatics, and discourse analysis are taught separately. As a consequence, students tend :

- To provide dictionary-based explanations without contextual depth.
- To overemphasize speaker intention without textual grounding.
- To ignore ideological dimensions.

A hybrid approach offers several advantages: It encourages multidimensional analysis, improves interpretation accuracy, develops critical thinking, reflects authentic communication, enhances intercultural competence. In multilingual African contexts, where English interacts with local languages and cultures, integrated analysis is especially valuable to avoid speakers' intent alterations. Baha (2015) warns language learners and translators against such alterations saying:

Translating a text into another language will thus require from the translator to have to express the cultural windows of the source language. This is the question of whether a translation can ever help us understand fully a society that is different from our own; given the fact that every society has its own 'theories' of life and the universe.

To sum up, language learners should be alerted about the interaction of semantics, pragmatics (including its cultural aspects) and discourse analysis in meaning co-production. Only such an approach will enable them to carry out accurate and un-biased analyses of texts.

#### **V. Discussion**

The findings of this article demonstrate that meaning construction is dynamic. Full meaning of an utterance results from an interaction between semantics, pragmatics and discourse analysis. The speaker's words, their semantic features and syntactical combination serve as a starting-point; they provide the raw material or the basic building blocks of meaning. Pragmatics leans on this raw material, adjusts it to the context.

Discourse analysis shows how the utterance fits into the larger framework of social interactions and gives it its ultimate significance.

In other terms, semantics gives us the potential for meaning. It constitutes the meaning foundation on which pragmatics leans to tell us what is meant in the moment, taking into account the situational and cultural context. Discourse analysis shows how the adjusted meaning functions within a larger system of human interaction taking into consideration social ideologies and power relation, thematic and lexical cohesion and coherence. The hybrid model avoids two extremes, namely semantic reductionism (ignoring context) and pragmatic relativism (ignoring linguistic structure).

The model proposes interdependence of the three linguistic fields (semantics, pragmatics and discourse analysis) and it suggests that meaning emerges from lexical encoding, contextual inference, cultural knowledge, social ideologies and power relations.

## **Conclusion**

This article has advocated an integrated approach to meaning that bridges semantics, pragmatics, and discourse analysis. Through qualitative examples drawn from English and swahili contexts, it has shown that none of these three domains of linguistics fully explains meaning in isolation. A hybrid model reflects the ecological nature of language described by Halliday and Mathiessen (2014), where meaning operates across stratified layers of context, semantics, grammar, and expression. Adopting this framework in linguistic research and education can strengthen analytical precision, enhance intercultural communication, promote critical discourse awareness and improve pedagogical practice. Future research may extend this model to digital discourse, multimodal communication, and applied linguistics contexts.

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