

SEMANTIC REPRESENTATION AND PRAGMATIC INTERPRETATION: A LEECHIAN ANALYSIS WITH REFERENCE TO CLOUD ATLAS

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Abstract

This study examines the distinction between semantics and pragmatics through Geoffrey Leech's theoretical framework presented in *Principles of Pragmatics*. The research focuses on two central propositions: first, that semantic representation is distinct from pragmatic interpretation, and second, that semantics is rule-governed while pragmatics is principle-controlled. Using qualitative theoretical analysis, the study investigates Leech's critique of the performative hypothesis and speech act theory, particularly their limitations in explaining natural communication. The findings demonstrate that semantic meaning cannot fully account for speaker intention, contextual inference, and multifunctional utterances. Likewise, purely pragmatic models such as speech act theory oversimplify communication by reducing language to discrete action categories. The analysis confirms that semantics provides the structural basis for meaning, whereas pragmatics explains how speakers use language flexibly according to communicative goals and contextual factors. The study concludes that maintaining the analytical distinction between semantics and pragmatics offers a more comprehensive model for understanding natural language use.

Keywords: semantics; pragmatics; speech act theory; illocutionary force; Geoffrey Leech; performative hypothesis; language meaning; contextual interpretation ..

Introduction

When people communicate, they do not only produce grammatically correct sentences but also convey intentions, attitudes, and implied meanings. In everyday interaction, the same sentence may communicate different meanings depending on the context in which it is used.¹ For example, the utterance It is cold here may simply describe temperature, but in another situation

¹ Geoffrey Leech . *Principles of Pragmatics*- London: Longman, 1983.- 9.



it may function as a polite request to close a window. This demonstrates that meaning in language cannot be understood solely through grammatical structure.

Linguistics traditionally distinguishes between **semantics** and **pragmatics** in order to explain this phenomenon. **Semantics** studies literal meaning encoded in words and sentences, including grammatical and logical relations. In contrast, **pragmatics** focuses on how speakers use language in real communicative situations and how listeners interpret intended meaning through context.

An important pragmatic concept is the **speech act**, which refers to an action performed through language, such as promising, requesting, warning, or apologizing.² For example, when a speaker says I apologize, the utterance itself performs the act of apologizing. Closely related to this is illocutionary force, which refers to the speaker's communicative intention behind an utterance.³ Thus, a sentence may have one grammatical form but another communicative function. Several linguistic theories attempted to explain meaning either entirely through grammar or entirely through communicative action. The performative hypothesis, for example, proposed that every sentence contains an underlying performative verb such as I state or I ask. Geoffrey Leech criticizes this view as theoretically implausible because it unnecessarily embeds pragmatic force inside semantic structure.

Leech instead argues that semantic representation and pragmatic interpretation must remain distinct analytical levels. According to him, semantics is rule-governed, while pragmatics is controlled by communicative principles sensitive to context.⁴ This study analyzes Leech's theoretical distinction between semantics and pragmatics and examines how this distinction explains natural communication more effectively than purely grammatical or purely speech-act-based models.

Similar pragmatic phenomena can also be observed in literary and cinematic discourse. In *Cloud Atlas*, characters frequently communicate meanings indirectly, relying on contextual interpretation rather than literal expression. The statement "Our lives are not our own"⁵ functions not only as a philosophical observation but also as an implied warning concerning moral responsibility and human interconnectedness. Such examples demonstrate that communication involves pragmatic inference beyond grammatical structure

Methods

This study uses a qualitative theoretical analysis method. The primary data source is Geoffrey Leech's *Principles of Pragmatics*, specifically Chapter 2, "A Set of Postulates."⁶

The analysis involved close reading of Leech's discussion on:

- semantic representation and pragmatic interpretation,
- rule-governed grammar and principle-controlled pragmatics,

² John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* -Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969, 16–17

³ Geoffrey Leech. *Principles of Pragmatics* -London: Longman, 1983.- 11.

⁴ Geoffrey Leech . *Principles of Pragmatics*- London: Longman, 1983.-13 p

⁵ David Mitchell. *Cloud Atlas*-New York: Random House, 2004.-134p

⁶ Geoffrey Leech . *Principles of Pragmatics*- London: Longman, 1983.-20-23 p



-limitations of speech act classification.

Examples presented by Leech, including passive constructions, performative structures, and ambiguous utterances, were selected as analytical evidence. Since this is a theoretical study, no corpus data or participant observation was used.

Results: Semantic representation differs from pragmatic interpretation.

The analysis shows that semantic representation refers to the logical or grammatical structure of an utterance, while pragmatic interpretation concerns how meaning is inferred in context. Leech rejects attempts to incorporate pragmatic meaning directly into semantics. The performative hypothesis suggested that all sentences contain implicit performative structures such as I state that...

However, this theory creates analytical redundancy by assuming repeated hidden clauses even in simple expository writing.

For example, an encyclopedia article would theoretically contain an implicit I state that... before every sentence. This demonstrates that speaker intention should not be treated as part of grammatical structure.

Semantics is rule-governed; pragmatics is principle-controlled

Leech further argues that grammar operates through formal rules, whereas pragmatics operates through flexible principles.⁷ Grammatical rules are constitutive and categorical. For example:

-Martha killed the fly.

-The fly was killed by Martha.

If the passive rule is incompletely applied, the result becomes ungrammatical:

-The fly was killed Martha.

By contrast, pragmatics explains why speakers may choose one grammatical structure over another. For instance, the principle of end-focus places new information at sentence-final position:

The fly was killed by MARTHA.

This is not grammatically required but communicatively motivated.

Speech act categories are insufficient. The analysis also shows limitations in rigid speech act classifications. Searle categorizes utterances into types such as warnings, requests, and promises⁸. However, real communication often involves multiple simultaneous purposes. Leech illustrates this with the utterance:

“Considering that I am a hostage, I should say that I have been treated fairly.”⁹

This utterance simultaneously informs reporters, reassures relatives, avoids offending captors, and increases chances of release. Therefore, assigning only one speech act label oversimplifies communicative complexity.

A similar distinction appears in *Cloud Atlas* when characters employ indirect language shaped by social context. When Sonmi-451 declares, “I will not be subjected to criminal abuse,”¹⁰ the sentence semantically expresses refusal, yet pragmatically it performs resistance, self-assertion,

⁷ Geoffrey Leech . *Principles of Pragmatics*- London: Longman, 1983.- 22p

⁸ John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* -Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969, 18 p

⁹ Geoffrey Leech . *Principles of Pragmatics*- London: Longman, 1983.- 23p

¹⁰ David Mitchell. *Cloud Atlas*-New York: Random House, 2004.-134p



and ideological defiance. The intended meaning therefore extends beyond grammatical structure.

Discussion

The findings support Leech's claim that semantics and pragmatics must be studied as complementary but separate domains. Attempts to reduce pragmatics to semantics, as seen in the performative hypothesis, over-formalize language and ignore contextual flexibility.

Similarly, speech act theory overemphasizes language as action and underestimates grammar as an independent structural system. While language certainly performs actions, communication is not reducible to discrete categories such as promising or warning. Leech's distinction between rules and principles provides a more realistic account of communication. Grammar determines structural possibility, while pragmatics explains language choice, indirectness, ambiguity, and multifunctionality.¹¹ This framework better reflects authentic communication, in which speakers often pursue several goals simultaneously and intentionally leave meaning partially negotiable.

Conclusion

This study confirms that semantic representation and pragmatic interpretation are distinct but interdependent aspects of meaning. Semantics is governed by formal grammatical rules, while pragmatics is controlled by contextual and rhetorical principles. Leech's model offers a more comprehensive explanation of natural language than approaches that rely exclusively on grammar or speech acts. The distinction between semantics and pragmatics therefore remains fundamental for understanding meaning in real communication.

Examples from *Cloud Atlas* additionally demonstrate that contextual interpretation, indirectness, and multifunctionality are essential components of authentic discourse. Pragmatic analysis thus remains a crucial framework for understanding how language operates beyond literal meaning.

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¹¹ Geoffrey Leech . *Principles of Pragmatics*- London: Longman, 1983.-23p

