

Occasioned Semantics: Meaning in Verbal Interaction

Occasioned semantics refers to the study of the constraints on, and rhetorical and sequential consequences of, the use of expressions in actual occasions of verbal interaction. It deals with the organized fields of meaning that are constructed in conversational exchange. Membership categorization analysis and sequential analysis, as well as certain developments in ethnosemantics and linguistic pragmatics, provide the starting points for an occasioned semantics. It poses, at least, the following questions: What are the contextual constraints on occurrence of particular expressions on a given occasion? What are the intelligible, relevant, plausible, contextually appropriate alternatives? What structured relations hold among expressions used in a spate of talk? What are the sequential implications of these structures? What are the rhetorical uses, including implication and implicature, of particular expressions on particular occasions? These questions, of course, are not independent.

In this paper, I will attempt to offer an initial set of concepts and procedures for an occasioned semantics. I will focus, especially, on the structural properties of generalization and specification, co-categorization and contrast, marking, and scaling. Given time limitations, I will illustrate one of these — generalization — with data extracts from various sources. I will discuss some contextual constraints on, and show some rhetorical uses of, generalization. Some preliminary observations: 1. Many, perhaps most, referents can be formulated at various levels of specificity (e.g., elm, tree, plant). However, the generalization structures available on any particular occasion are not determined solely by the repertoire of semantic/cultural resources; they are a product of emergent and indexical processes. 2. The level of specificity may be constrained by contextual factors, including (but not limited to) recipient design, argument structure, discursive context. 3. Using a general formulation of some set of items, S1, may provide for the categorization of some contrasting set, S2. 4. The choice of a particular level of generalization may have various sequential implications: it may rule out certain possibilities and invite particular responses. 5. The choice of a particular level of generalization may have various rhetorical uses, e.g., highlighting, concealing, demonstrating.

Occasioned semantics is itself a sub-area of the study of formulation, which includes such matters as propositions and accounts. I will conclude by considering the issues involved in relating occasioned semantics to the more inclusive study of formulation.