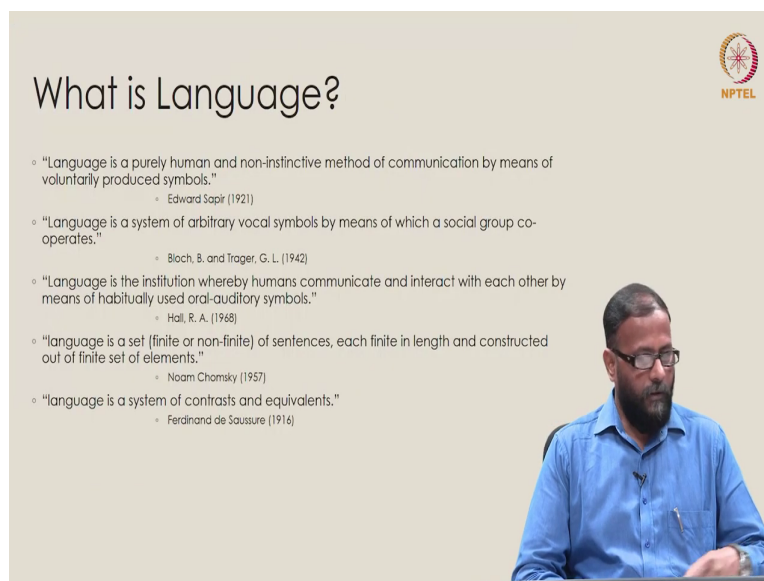


Fundamental Concepts in Sociolinguistics
Doctor Om Prakash
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Gautam Buddha University, Greater Noida, UP-201312
Lecture - 02
Language as a System

Hello everyone. Today we are going to talk about language as a system. When we say language, we will discuss the acquisition process, how we acquire the language, how language comes to us we never think on these terms. It comes to us so naturally that we take it for granted. But it is a very beautiful, complex phenomenon.

So, we are going to talk about language as a system today. But before we talk about language as a system let us try to understand what language by itself is. So, many scholars have you know tried to explain the language as a phenomenon. That is as a social phenomenon or as the human phenomena.

(Refer Slide Time: 01:02)



The slide is titled "What is Language?" and features a list of definitions from various linguists. In the bottom right corner, there is a video inset showing a man with a beard and glasses, wearing a blue shirt, speaking. The NPTEL logo is visible in the top right corner of the slide.

- "Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communication by means of voluntarily produced symbols."
 - Edward Sapir (1921)
- "Language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group co-operates."
 - Bloch, B. and Trager, G. L. (1942)
- "Language is the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory symbols."
 - Hall, R. A. (1968)
- "language is a set (finite or non-finite) of sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of finite set of elements."
 - Noam Chomsky (1957)
- "language is a system of contrasts and equivalents."
 - Ferdinand de Saussure (1916)

But we will talk about a few important perspectives like Edward Sapir. So, he says language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communication by means of voluntarily produced symbols. Now, we need to understand these two very crucial words in this statement. 'Purely human' this is a one and number two 'voluntarily produced' symbols.

So, Sapir considers language to be purely human and we make voluntarily these noises and we arrange these noises into certain strings which gives us certain meaning. And then they are further combined at different levels, and we socialize, interact and communicate.

The other statement by Bloch and Trager in 1942 is that language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group cooperates. Now, a new word now introduced here 'arbitrary', we will come to it later, but again vocal symbols voluntarily produced but these symbols are arbitrary in nature.

And he also emphasizes, they also emphasize on the social aspect of it. That we need language to socialize, interact and communicate, share. Then R. A. Hall says language is the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral auditory symbols.


So, everyone is talking about vocal symbol, auditory symbol, oral auditory symbol. But another important perspective added in this statement is the word 'institution'; and when we say institution he is emphasizing on social function of language, language which is socially, culturally rooted.

Then we have Chomskyan perspective, and he says 'language is a set of sentences each finite in length and constructed out of finite set of elements'. If you look at the total number of sounds in a language, they are limited. For example, in English we have 20 vowels and 24 consonants, 44 sounds.

But can we count the number of words that we have in English? Or can we count the number of sentences we have produced so far in English? So, look at the infinite creativity of the phenomena called language, English language for that matter. Here that with limited set of sounds we can create unlimited number of words, we keep on adding new words every time.


So, Chomsky perspective gives us a structural dependency phenomenon in language that language is structurally dependent, rule-governed and it allows us to create infinite number of utterances and words with finite set of linguistic elements available in the language. A very important perspective with which the modern linguistic discussions began by Saussure who said language is a system of contrasts and equivalence.

(Refer Slide Time: 05:19)



What we can deduct...

- A system of arbitrary vocal symbols
- Produced and received in oral-auditory channel
- These vocal symbols (units of sound) are discrete and distinguishable.
- The sounds of a language combine organize into meaningful strings.
- Such constructions continue at higher levels (from individual sound to complex discourse).
- Thus, we communicate, interact and socialize.



So, out of all these perspective what can we deduct? What can we deduct out of all these perspectives? First thing that we understand is language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols. When you say vocal symbols that means we are talking about noises; the sounds that we produce. These sounds individually do not carry any meaning; they do not have any meaning.

But they are the minimal units combined together to create larger units and then meaningful units out of it. Then the second deduction that we can make out of it is that sounds are produced and received in oral auditory channel, oral and auditory, the reception. So, we have oral and auditory channels and the sounds are produced and received in this channel.

Another deduction that we can make out of it is that these vocal symbols which are units of sound are discrete and distinguishable. So, each sound that a language has is distinct and unique and they contrast with each other. Because they contrast with each other, we are able to find the word boundaries where one word ends, where one chunk of this meaningful string ends, and the other begins.

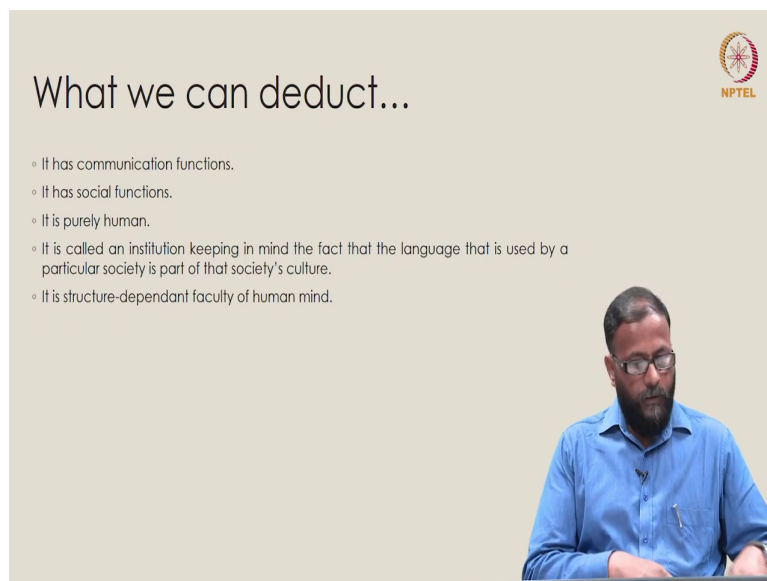
Each of these sounds are unique, discrete in nature and we can identify them, they are in contrast and acquisition, like pa and ba for that matter, ka and ga, sa and cha. So, these sounds are separate, independent, distinguishable, and discrete. Then we can deduct out of all these perspectives that the sounds of a language combine and organize into meaningful strings.

Individually, these sounds do not have any meaning. The sound 'ka' does not mean anything. So, when we say a word like cow, how you spell it, how you write it c-o-w. three letters, but sound is, ka, ah and o, so ka, ah, and o, cow. Now, ka individually does not mean anything, ah individually does not mean anything and o individually does not mean anything, but they together in a particular combination create a string which has some meaning.

And it refers to an animal, we have mental images of that animal; and we can relate to that mental image of a cow. So, when we say cow, it triggers an image and we get some correlation by string of sound called 'cow' and an objective reality that is called an animal and we can relate the two, so that is how this, they create meaning out of it.

And then such constructions continue, this combination continues at high levels. So, strings of meaning in words, then these words are combined into phrases, then these phrases are combined into clauses, sentences and then multiple sentences combined into paragraphs, and whole discourse.

(Refer Slide Time: 09:22)



The slide features a title "What we can deduct..." in a large, dark font. Below the title is a bulleted list of five points. In the top right corner, there is a circular logo with a red and white design and the text "NPTEL" underneath. In the bottom right corner, there is a small video inset showing a man with a beard and glasses, wearing a blue shirt, sitting at a desk.

What we can deduct...

- It has communication functions.
- It has social functions.
- It is purely human.
- It is called an institution keeping in mind the fact that the language that is used by a particular society is part of that society's culture.
- It is structure-dependant faculty of human mind.

Another set of deductions that we continue making out of it is that it has communication functions. Of course, it has communication functions; it has social functions. So, language has social function and language is the best endowment to a human being.

Let us imagine that language is also such kind of commodity that we have and we use. So, all other commodities and things material possessions that we have like money or gold or things

can be taken away. So, let us imagine a situation where your language can be taken away. So, one fine night you sleep and then somehow someone steals your language.

You are robbed of your language, just let us imagine, which is not possible. But let us imagine that you can be stolen. It can be stolen from you out of you. What will happen? How do we react to it? This is a hypothetical situation? How do you react? Can we imagine our life even a single day without language?


That is the significance of language in our life; that is the centrality of language in our everyday interaction. You cannot imagine a single day without language. It comes to us so naturally that we take it for granted, but it has a very crucial social function. The social configuration, the social networks are strengthened and carried out and established in terms of linguistic interactions the patterns of interactions.

So, we will talk about all these things in later classes but today it has social function; it is purely human because you know language is the best endowment that we have. It is called an institution keeping in mind the fact that language that is used by a particular society is part of that society's culture.

So, languages are culturally rooted, socially rooted and they reflect the structures of a language. A particular language reflects structure of that society configuration of the society the way you interact the way you greet the way you meet and socialize all these patterns. So, these social elements, cultural elements are embedded and implicitly there when we speak on any language.


So, language is socially rooted, culturally rooted. You cannot take culture out of a language or language out of a culture, so there they have a symbiotic relationship. And post Chomskyian era now we all know that language is structure dependent and it is a beautiful faculty of human mind.

(Refer Slide Time: 13:06)



Ferdinand de Saussure [1857-1913]

- A Swiss Scholar of Sanskrit, a linguist
- Known as Father of Modern Linguistics
- A Course in General linguistics (1916).
- Structuralism: Language has structure (governed by rules).
- Sign, signifier and signified: relationship is arbitrary and culturally constructed.
- Meaning is fixed. There is structure followed by language.
- He introduced concepts of binary opposition in language:
 - Signifier vs. Signified
 - Langue vs. Parole
 - Synchrony vs. diachrony
 - Paradigm vs. Syntagm



So, this is language for you but how will all these discussions start if you want to understand these concepts in modern linguistic debates and discourses. We cannot ignore Ferdinand de Saussure. His life spans 1857 to 1913. He was a Swiss scholar of Sanskrit, and you know incidentally he was assigned the task to teach linguistics.

He taught linguistics. Also, he did not write the book but after his death in 1913, after three years based on his class lectures his students created this book posthumously and that is called 'A Course in General linguistics' which was published in 1916 and that became the reference point for discussion in these terms in modern linguistics.

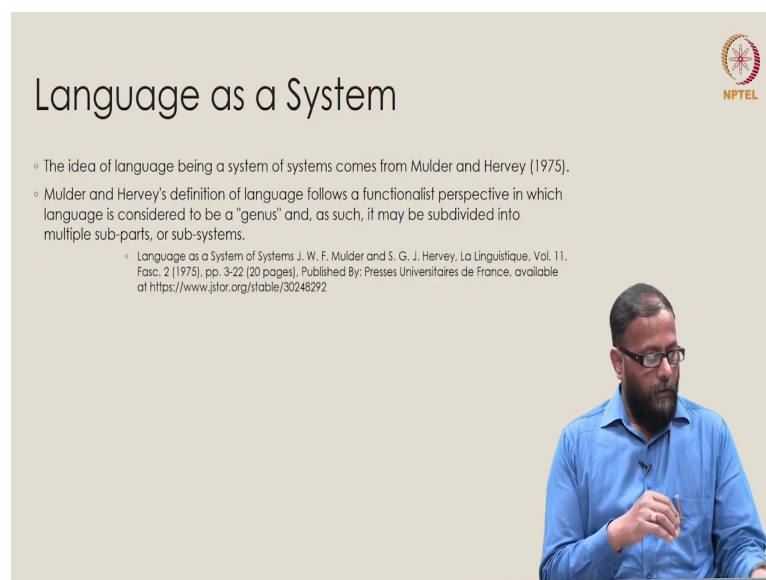
And he is also considered as father of modern linguistics. And perhaps that is the phase where we refer to a structuralism where language was considered structure dependent and rule-governed phenomena. So, he talked in terms of sign, signifier and signified. So 'cow', a vocal symbol, three vocal symbols ka, ah, o signify a particular animal. These sounds in a string trigger a mental image.

But then arbitrary if you remember the word, we talked about in the beginning arbitrary the relationship between signifier like cow the word and signified the animal it refers or represents in our mental images, there is no direct relationship between these two. So, signifier and signified cow as a word, and cow as an animal do not have corresponding relationship, so arbitrary.

It has arbitrary relationship. There is no one-to-one relationship with, why cow is a cow, pen is a pen, watch is a watch, no idea. How you name and when you name then the same mental image is triggered in the speaker's mind as well as the listeners minds, this relationship is arbitrary. He called it 'signifier' and 'signified'. He said meaning is fixed and there is a structure followed by language.

He introduced concepts of binary oppositions in language like signifier and signified, langue and parole, synchrony and diachrony, paradigm and syntagm. So, we will talk about all these in future videos. But Ferdinand de Saussure is the reference point for discussion on modern linguistics and also understanding language as a structural phenomenon. How languages has a structure and is rule-governed and how it represents the objective reality? So, language as a system is the reference point in modern linguistics.


(Refer Slide Time: 16:46)



The slide features a title 'Language as a System' in a large, dark font. In the top right corner, there is a circular logo with a red and white starburst pattern and the text 'NPTEL' below it. The main content consists of three bullet points: the first states that the idea of language as a system of systems comes from Mulder and Hervey (1975); the second explains that Mulder and Hervey's definition follows a functionalist perspective where language is a 'genus' that can be subdivided into multiple sub-parts or sub-systems; the third provides a citation for their work: 'Language as a System of Systems J. W. F. Mulder and S. G. J. Hervey, La Linguistique, Vol. 11, Fasc. 2 (1975), pp. 3-22 (20 pages), Published By: Presses Universitaires de France, available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30248292>'. In the bottom right corner, there is a video inset showing a man with a beard and glasses, wearing a blue shirt, sitting at a desk and speaking.


Language as a system began with Saussure and also carried forward by Mulder and Hervey. They published an article in 1975. The reference is there in the slide you can see. And their idea of language as a system has in its fundamental belief. They talked about social functions of language. Because Mulder talked about system of semiotics and from there it is derived language as a system.

(Refer Slide Time: 17:44)



Levels of Representation

- The idea also owes to the American Structuralist traditions where they talk about "levels of representation" of language in terms of:
 - Phonology
 - Morphology
 - Syntax
 - Semantics
 - Pragmatics
- Building blocks of a language.




This idea that language is a structure, language is a structure and a definite system also owes to the American structuralism where they talk in terms of building blocks of a language and levels of representation. And so, what are the levels, what are the building blocks? The answer is : sounds. Sounds are the minimal units of language.

Then the sounds are arranged in a particular string, in a particular combination to give certain meaning. So, then we reach another level where these sounds are combined and are called words; then these words are combined into utterances and sentences. So, phonology is where we study sounds: the minimal unit of language called sounds.

Then the second level is morphology, where the sounds are arranged in a particularly meaningful combination. Then we reach the level of syntax, third level, where these meaningful units called words are arranged in a particular combination governed by certain rules of the language to give you sentences.


Then semantics, it talks about meaning and how meaning is derived out of these structures. So, first three levels phonology, morphology, syntax they refer to structure, the two levels semantics and then finally pragmatics. The way we understand these utterances and sentences in a real-world situation is called pragmatics. So, they talk in terms of these five levels of representation, and they are the building blocks of a language.

(Refer Slide Time: 19:53)



A system of sub-systems...

- Language is considered as a system primarily because it is made of linguistic units that are interdependent of each other.
- Human Anatomy: A system of multiple sub-systems.
- Language has smaller units working within a whole system, and thus, it becomes a system of sub-systems.



Now, you can understand language in terms of human anatomy; let us imagine human anatomy where we have multiple systems. So, human anatomy is a single system and then within the single system we have multiple systems like nervous system, digestive system etc. and they are not independent. So, human anatomy when you say is a system, if you believe that human anatomy is a system, then it is made of multiple sub-systems like nervous system, digestive system and so on.

But it is interesting to note that these systems are not independent systems, these systems are interdependent systems. And when we are healthy and hearty and when we are functioning, that means entire system is functioning well.

All the subsystems are interdependent and their function interdependently and constituting the whole human anatomy as a single system; exactly in the similar analogy we can understand language. So, language has system of sounds, language has system and rules of combining the sounds into words, language has a system of combining these words into larger strings and chunks called utterances or sentences.

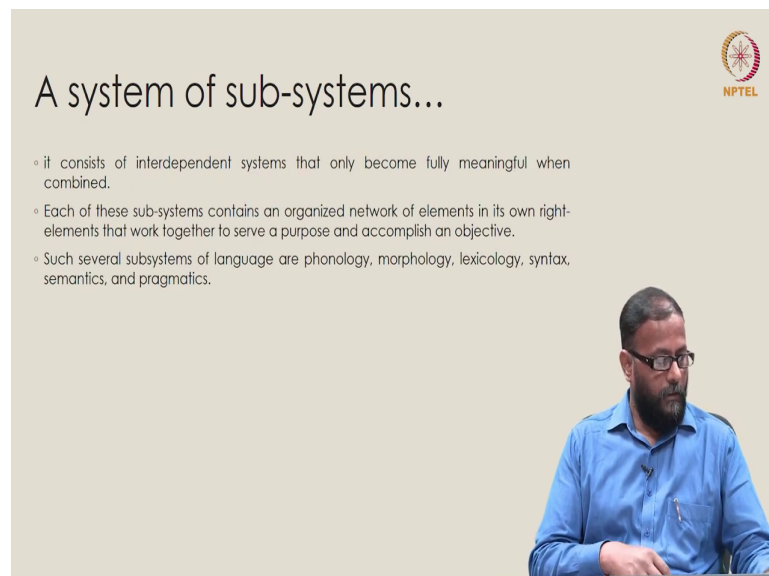
Then each of these systems are the system within their own right, like for example sound system of a language, it is a whole system within its own right because there are certain restrictions put on combining these sounds in a particular manner. Cow - ka ah o, but can we say, let us say if you go by spelling c-o-w, can we say w-o-c, c-w-o, o-w-c, so there are

certain restrictions and then what it represents in the objective world is objective reality. So, sound system of a language is a complete system.

Then we come to meaningful chunks how they are combined together, so they are called morphemes, the minimal meaningful unit, if you say 'sound', each individual sound does not carry any meaning, but like for example, past forming morphemes like suffixes like 'ed'. If we attach 'ed' to 'kill', it becomes 'killed'. (past tense)

So, morphology or how the words are formed? That is, the entire word formation processes, how the verbs are inflected that how new words are formed, what are the restrictions applied on them? How meanings are derived? So morphology in itself is a system. It is in its own right.

(Refer Slide Time: 23:51)



A system of sub-systems...

- it consists of interdependent systems that only become fully meaningful when combined.
- Each of these sub-systems contains an organized network of elements in its own right- elements that work together to serve a purpose and accomplish an objective.
- Such several subsystems of language are phonology, morphology, lexicology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics.

The slide also features the NPTEL logo in the top right corner and a video inset in the bottom right corner showing a man with a beard and glasses, wearing a blue shirt, sitting at a desk and speaking.

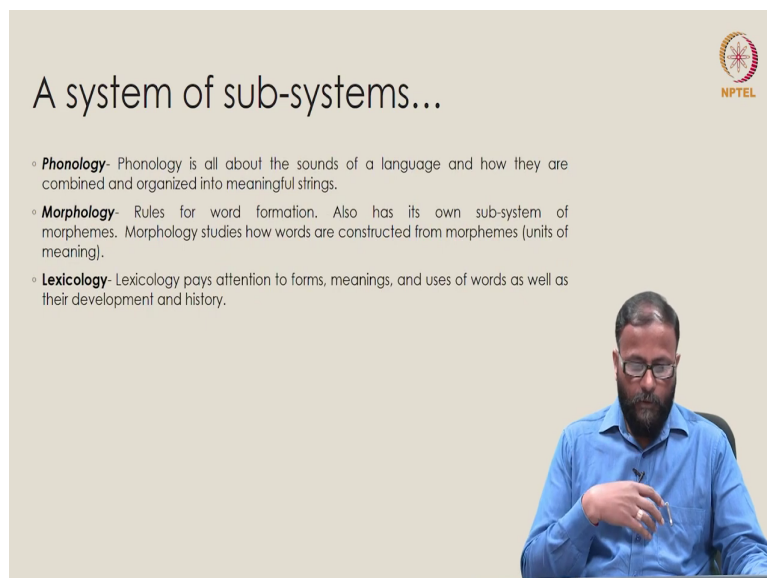
So syntax in itself is a whole system rule-governed. So, we can say that based on our human anatomy analogy we can say that language is also a complete system of multiple smaller subsystems, the system within system. So, language is considered as a system primarily because it is made of linguistic units or components that are interdependent of each other.

So, they are not independent. Language has a smaller unit working within a whole system like human anatomy. It becomes a system of multiple subsystems. Like morphology, phonology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, lexicology. So, these are all subsystems, it is different thing that all these subsystems are system within their own right.

But they all together interdependently work to give you the phenomena called language. It consists of interdependent systems that only become fully meaningful when they are combined. Imagine if any deficiency in any of the systems in our anatomy, we are sick we are ill, the system does not function properly.

So, all these subsystems of a language are interdependent, symbiotic and they function with perfect harmony, then only you get a language as a solid single system. Each of these subsystems contains an organized network of elements in its own right that work together to serve a purpose and accomplish an objective called communication or interaction or socialization.

(Refer Slide Time: 26:07)



The slide features a title 'A system of sub-systems...' in the top left. In the top right corner is the NPTEL logo, which consists of a circular emblem with a sun-like pattern and the text 'NPTEL' below it. The main content is a bulleted list of three linguistic sub-systems:

- **Phonology**- Phonology is all about the sounds of a language and how they are combined and organized into meaningful strings.
- **Morphology**- Rules for word formation. Also has its own sub-system of morphemes. Morphology studies how words are constructed from morphemes (units of meaning).
- **Lexicology**- Lexicology pays attention to forms, meanings, and uses of words as well as their development and history.

In the bottom right corner of the slide, there is a video inset showing a man with a beard and glasses, wearing a blue shirt, sitting at a desk and speaking.

So, we have talked about all these things. phonology is all about the sounds of a language, their nature, their characteristics, the restrictions on combinations. Now, sounds individually do not mean anything, but the rules that govern, putting the sounds in particular string, what are the restrictions, the properties of the sounds, place of articulation all these sounds, manner of articulation of the sounds are studied as a part of phonology.

So these are all part of phonology as a subsystem. Then morphology- the rules for word formation also has its own subsystem of morphemes and morphology studies how words are constructed from morphemes units of meaning, small units of meaning. So, it is a system in its own right. Then lexicology is a part of morphology.

(Refer Slide Time: 27:14)

A system of sub-systems...



- **Syntax**- Rules for word order and arrangements. Syntax studies how words are formed into phrases and sentences and why they are structured and ordered the way they are (why subjects usually precede verbs in English, for instance)
- **Semantics**- Rules of language content. It has a sub-system of its own based on vocabulary and word localization. Semantics is all about the meanings that are expressed through words and syntax.
- **Pragmatics**- Rules of language usage (function and appropriateness). Pragmatics looks at how language is used in context and how meanings can vary or be revealed or concealed according to a speaker's situation.



Syntax - The combination of these words or meaningful units into larger units called sentence. That is, rules for word order and arrangements in a particular structure. Then semantics - very crucial thing. The meaning part of the strings, all these smaller structures has a subsystem of its own based on vocabulary and word localization.

Semantics is all about the meaning that are expressed through words and syntax. Always remember meaning of a particular word means we will talk in pragmatics. When we talk about pragmatics, the two meaning of a sentence is not total sum of the meaning of individual words.

So, pragmatics talks about how you interpret these meanings. That is, combination of these meanings in a particular structure in a real-world situation. And it becomes visible in terms of metaphors and the idioms that we use in a particular culture because metaphors and idioms are culturally sensitive.

And we all, if you are not familiar with the culture, if you are not familiar with the society and the context in which it is being used you will not be able to derive meaning out of it because the meaning of a sentence is not the total sum of meaning of individual words. A very famous sentence by Chomsky “Colourless green ideas sleep furiously,” it is a syntactic structure, it is a sentence because each of the words in in this particular sentence has some meaning.

So, “Colourless green ideas sleep furiously,” this whole sentence, what does it mean?

We have individual meanings, but how it is interpreted? Can we consider it grammatical? Can we consider it to be a grammatical sentence in a language called let us say 'English'? Can we take it as a sentence? What is the meaning of the sentence? How do we interpret it? Because something green cannot be colourless and then idea, there is no point talking about idea in terms of colours.

Whether it is colourless or green, meaningless, then sleep verb, it is a plus animate word, only living being sleep, non-living beings for them ,it is, you may choose. And then furiously, this adverb cannot go with sleep because how can we be furious while sleeping. So, pragmatics is all about how we interpret the meaning out of a meaningful structure. How we interpret the meaning?

Like for example, somebody visits you and you say "Why don't you sit?" Is it really a question or is it an offer? We know that it is an offer, a guest who visits you and you offer that why do not you say, that means you are offering a seat to the person? How do you understand these structures and meaning, how do you derive meaning out of it in the real-world situation?

And for example, in all discourse markers and other elements of the language, their roles and their functions in a sentence and how we use that particular structure or a word in a particular social context is what pragmatics is all about. So, pragmatic talks about rules of language use; how you use it.

So, one, the language or the linguistic element or linguistic unit has its own linguistic function. Then how are these units used in a particular context to get you the communicative function of it - is what pragmatics talks about. So, pragmatics look at how language is used in a context and how meaning can be can vary or be revealed or concealed according to a speaker's situation.

So, now we all understand language as a system. It is a system beautiful; I mean Chomsky refers to language as a structural dependent system where these structures can be met, investigated and explained with mathematically algorithmic precision. So, it is a structure, it is a system, complete beautiful system and then this system has multiple subsystems like sound pattern of a language.

Sound system is called phonology. But it is a complete unit in itself. Then morphology, the word formation processes, how words are created. And then putting them into sentence, larger chunk, larger structure, which is called syntax. It is a complete system within itself.

Then how we derive meaning out of these structures and that is called semantics; is complete system in itself. How these meanings are interpreted in a real-world situation - we can call pragmatics. So, is not beautiful to see that phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics, these five subsystems together function and in an interdependent way to give us language as a complete system?

So, we understand today that language is a system; it has multiple subsystems all the subsystems together function in an interdependent fashion to give us language a complete system.