

UNIT 2 SENTENCES, UTTERANCES, AND PROPOSITIONS

Introduction This unit introduces some basic notions in semantics. It is important that you master these notions from the outset as they will keep recurring throughout the course.

Instruction Read the following out loud:

Virtue is its own reward

Now read it out loud again.

Comment The same sentence was involved in the two readings, but you made two different utterances, i.e. two unique physical events took place.

Definition An UTTERANCE is any stretch of talk, by one person, before and after which there is silence on the part of that person.

An utterance is the USE by a particular speaker, on a particular occasion, of a piece of language, such as a sequence of sentences, or a single phrase, or even a single word.

Practice Now decide whether the following could represent utterances. Indicate your answer by circling *Yes* or *No*.

- | | |
|---|-----------------|
| (1) 'Hello' | <i>Yes / No</i> |
| (2) 'Not much' | <i>Yes / No</i> |
| (3) 'Utterances may consist of a single word, a single phrase or a single sentence. They may also consist of a sequence of sentences. It is not unusual to find utterances that consist of one or more grammatically incomplete sentence-fragments. In short, there is no simple relation of correspondence between utterances and sentences' | <i>Yes / No</i> |
| (4) 'Pxgotmgt' | <i>Yes / No</i> |
| (5) 'Schplotzenpflaaaaaargh!' | <i>Yes / No</i> |

Feedback	(1) Yes (2) Yes (3) Yes, even though it would be a bit of a mouthful to say in one utterance (i.e. without pauses). (4) No, this string of sounds is not from any language. (5) No, for the same reason given for (4)
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Comment Utterances are physical events. Events are ephemeral. Utterances die on the wind. Linguistics deals with spoken language and we will have a lot to say about utterances in this book. But we will concentrate even more on another notion, that of sentences.

Definition (partial) A SENTENCE is neither a physical event nor a physical object. It is, conceived abstractly, a string of words put together by the grammatical rules of a language. A sentence can be thought of as the IDEAL string of words behind various realizations in utterances and inscriptions.

Practice Some examples will help to get the idea of a sentence across. Indicate your answer by circling *Yes* or *No*.

- | | |
|---|-----------------|
| (1) Do all (authentic) performances of <i>Macbeth</i> begin by using the same sentence? | <i>Yes / No</i> |
| (2) Do all (authentic) performances of <i>Macbeth</i> begin with the same utterance? | <i>Yes / No</i> |
| (3) Does it make sense to talk of the time and place of a sentence? | <i>Yes / No</i> |
| (4) Does it make sense to talk of the time and place of an utterance? | <i>Yes / No</i> |
| (5) Can one talk of a loud sentence? | <i>Yes / No</i> |
| (6) Can one talk of a slow utterance? | <i>Yes / No</i> |

Feedback (1) Yes (2) No (3) No (4) Yes (5) No (6) Yes

Comment Strictly, a book such as this contains no utterances (since books don't talk) or sentences (since sentences are abstract ideals). In semantics we need to make a careful distinction between utterances and sentences. In particular we need some way of making it clear when we are discussing sentences and when utterances. We adopt the convention that anything written between single quotation marks represents an utterance, and anything italicized represents a sentence or (similarly abstract) part of a sentence, such as a phrase or a word.

Example 'Help' represents an utterance.

The steeples have been struck by lightning represents a sentence.

'The steeples have been struck by lightning' represents an utterance.

John represents a word conceived as part of a sentence.

Practice (1) For each of the following label it as an utterance (U) or sentence (S), as appropriate, by circling your choice.

- | | |
|---|--------------|
| (a) 'The train now arriving at platform one is the 11.15 from King's Cross' | <i>U / S</i> |
| (b) <i>The pelican ignores the linguist</i> | <i>U / S</i> |

(2) Given our conventions, say what is wrong with the following:

(a) John announced *Mary's here* in his squeakiest voice

.....

.....

(b) 'Mary thought *how nice John was*'

.....

.....

Feedback (1) (a) U (b) S (2) 'Mary's here' should be in quotation marks since it represents John's utterance, i.e. the event of his using those words on a particular occasion. (b) A sentence, which is not a physical thing, cannot be part of an utterance, which is a physical event. 'How nice John was' should not be italicized. (Alternatively the whole example should be italicized and the quotation marks removed.)

Rule We have defined a sentence as a string of words. A given sentence always consists of the same words, and in the same order. Any change in the words, or in their order, makes a different sentence, for our purposes.

Example *Helen rolled up the carpet* }
Helen rolled the carpet up } different sentences
Sincerity may frighten the boy }
Sincerity may frighten the boy } the same sentence

Comment It would make sense to say that an utterance was in a particular accent (i.e. a particular way of pronouncing words). However, it would not make strict sense to say that a sentence was in a particular accent, because a sentence itself is only associated with phonetic characteristics such as accent and voice quality through a speaker's act of uttering it. Accent and voice quality belong strictly to the utterance, not to the sentence uttered.

Practice (1) Does it make sense to ask what language (e.g. English, French, Chinese) a sentence belongs to? Yes / No
 (2) What languages do the following sentences belong to?
Le jour de gloire est arrivé

.....

Alle Menschen sprechen eine Sprache

.....

Feedback (1) Yes (2) French, German

Comment Not all utterances are actually tokens of sentences, but sometimes only of parts of sentences, e.g. phrases or single words.

Definition A SENTENCE is a grammatically complete string of words expressing a (partial) complete thought.

Comment This very traditional definition is unfortunately vague, but it is hard to arrive at a better one for our purposes. It is intended to exclude any string of words that does not have a verb in it, as well as other strings. The idea is best shown by examples.

Example *I would like a cup of coffee* is a sentence.
Coffee, please is not a sentence.
In the kitchen is not a sentence.
Please put it in the kitchen is a sentence.

Practice Which of the following utterances are tokens of whole sentences (S) and which are not (NS)?

- | | |
|----------------------------|--------|
| (1) 'John' | S / NS |
| (2) 'Who is there?' | S / NS |
| (3) 'Mine' | S / NS |
| (4) 'It's mine' | S / NS |
| (5) 'Where shall I . . .?' | S / NS |

Feedback (1) NS (2) S (3) NS (4) S (5) NS

Comment Utterances of non-sentences, e.g. short phrases, or single words, are used by people in communication all the time. People do not converse wholly in (tokens of) wellformed sentences. But the abstract idea of a sentence is the basis for understanding even those expressions which are not sentences. In the overwhelming majority of cases, the meanings of non-sentences can best be analysed by considering them to be abbreviations, or incomplete versions, of whole sentences.

Practice Given below are some sample conversations. In each case the second utterance is not a token of a sentence. Write out a full sentence expressing the intended meaning more fully.

- (1) Magnus: 'When did Goethe die?'
 Fred: 'In 1832'
- (2) Hostess: 'Would you like tea or coffee?'
 Guest: 'Coffee, please'
- (3) A: 'Who won the battle of Waterloo?'
 B: 'Wellington'

Feedback (1) Goethe died in 1832 (2) I would like coffee please (3) Wellington won the battle of Waterloo

Comment Semantics is concerned with the meanings of non-sentences, such as phrases and incomplete sentences, just as much as with whole sentences. But it is more convenient to begin our analysis with the case of whole sentences. The meanings of whole sentences involve propositions; the notion of a proposition is central to semantics. What exactly a proposition is, is much debated by semanticists. We shall be content with a very simple definition.

Definition A PROPOSITION is that part of the meaning of the utterance of a declarative sentence which describes some state of affairs.

Comment The state of affairs typically involves persons or things referred to by expressions in the sentence and the situation or action they are involved in. In uttering a declarative sentence a speaker typically asserts a proposition.

Rule The notion of truth can be used to decide whether two sentences express different propositions. Thus if there is any conceivable set of circumstances in which one sentence is true, while the other is false, we can be sure that they express different propositions.

Practice Consider the following pairs of sentences. In each case, say whether there are any circumstances of which one member of the pair could be true and the other false (assuming in each case that the same name, e.g. *Harry*, refers to the same person).

- | | |
|--|----------|
| (1) <i>Harry took out the garbage</i>
<i>Harry took the garbage out</i> | Yes / No |
| (2) <i>John gave Mary a book</i>
<i>Mary was given a book by John</i> | Yes / No |
| (3) <i>Isobel loves Tony</i>
<i>Tony loves Isobel</i> | Yes / No |
| (4) <i>George danced with Ethel</i>
<i>George didn't dance with Ethel</i> | Yes / No |
| (5) <i>Dr Findlay killed Janet</i>
<i>Dr Findlay caused Janet to die</i> | Yes / No |

Feedback (1) No, these are always either both true or both false. We cannot imagine any situation in which one is true and the other false. (2) No (3) Yes, one could be true and the other false. (4) Yes (5) Yes, for example in the situation where Dr Findlay had caused Janet to die, but not intentionally, say by sending her to a place where, unknown to him, she was attacked. Someone else could in fact be guilty of killing her.

Comment True propositions correspond to facts, in the ordinary sense of the word *fact*. False propositions do not correspond to facts.

Practice In the present-day world,

- | | |
|--|----------|
| (1) Is it a fact that there are lions in Africa? | Yes / No |
| (2) Is the proposition that there are lions in Africa a true proposition? | Yes / No |
| (3) Is it a fact that the state of Arkansas is uninhabited by human beings? | Yes / No |
| (4) Is the proposition that the state of Arkansas is uninhabited by human beings true? | Yes / No |

Feedback (1) Yes (2) Yes (3) No (4) No

Comment One can entertain propositions in the mind regardless of whether they are true or false, e.g. by thinking them, or believing them. But only true propositions can be known.

- Practice**
- | | |
|---|----------|
| (1) If John wonders whether Alice is deceiving him, would it seem reasonable to say that he has the proposition that Alice is deceiving him in his mind, and is not sure whether it is a true or a false proposition? | Yes / No |
| (2) If I say to you, 'If Mary came to the party, Phyllis must have been upset', do I thereby put in your mind the proposition that Mary came to the party, without necessarily indicating whether it is true or not? | Yes / No |
| (3) If I say to you, 'Was your father in the Navy?', would it seem reasonable to say that I have the proposition that your father was in the Navy in my mind, and wish to know whether this proposition is true or not? | Yes / No |
| (4) Is there something odd about the following sentence? If so, what?
<i>Pamela considered the fact that her mother was alive and realized that it could not possibly be true.</i>
..... | |
| (5) Is there something similarly odd about the following sentence? If so, what?
<i>Pamela considered the proposition that her mother was alive and realized that it could not possibly be true.</i>
..... | |

- Feedback** (1) Yes (2) Yes (3) Yes (4) Yes, there is a kind of contradiction here, in that the same thing is said to be both 'a fact' and 'not possibly true'. (5) No, there is nothing odd about this sentence, because we stated that propositions can be either true or false.
- Comment** In our definition of 'proposition' we explicitly mentioned declarative sentences, but propositions are clearly involved in the meanings of other types of sentences, such as interrogatives, which are used to ask questions, and imperatives, which are used to convey orders. Normally, when a speaker utters a simple declarative sentence, he commits himself to the truth of the corresponding proposition: i.e. he asserts the proposition. By uttering a simple interrogative or imperative, a speaker can mention a particular proposition, without asserting its truth.
- Example** In saying, 'John can go' a speaker asserts the proposition that John can go. In saying, 'Can John go?', he mentions the same proposition but merely questions its truth. We say that corresponding declaratives and interrogatives (and imperatives) have the same propositional content.
- Practice** (1) In the following utterances, is any proposition asserted by the speaker?
- | | |
|---|----------|
| (a) 'Have you seen my toothbrush?' | Yes / No |
| (b) 'Get out of here this minute!' | Yes / No |
| (c) 'I'm afraid that I'll have to ask you to leave' | Yes / No |
- (2) Would you say that the members of the following sentence pairs have the same propositional content?
- | | |
|-------------------------------|----------|
| (a) <i>Go away, will you?</i> | |
| <i>You will go away</i> | Yes / No |
| (b) <i>Pigs might fly</i> | |
| <i>I'm a Dutchman</i> | Yes / No |
| (c) <i>I am an idiot</i> | |
| <i>Am I an idiot?</i> | Yes / No |

Feedback (1) (a) No (b) No (c) Yes (2) (a) Yes (b) No common proposition is involved. (c) Yes

Comment The notion of propositional content will be taken up again in unit 25. Propositions, unlike sentences, cannot be said to belong to any particular language. Sentences in different languages can correspond to the same proposition, if the two sentences are perfect translations of each other.

Example English *I am cold*, French *J'ai froid*, German *Mir ist kalt*, and Russian *Mne xolodno* can, to the extent to which they are perfect translations of each other, be said to correspond to the same proposition.

Comment One may question whether perfect translation between languages is ever possible. In point of fact, many linguists disagree about this and it is likely that absolutely perfect translation of the same proposition from one language to another is impossible. However, to simplify matters here we shall assume that in some, possibly very few, cases, perfect translation IS possible.

We shall have a lot to say in later units about utterances, sentences and propositions, since these concepts are at the bottom of all talk about meaning. We shall see that we have to be very careful, when talking about meaning, to make it clear whether we are dealing with utterances or sentences. To this end we shall try summarizing the relationship between these notions.

We shall use the terms ‘proposition’, ‘sentence’, and ‘utterance’ in such a way that anything that can be said of propositions can also be said of utterances, but not necessarily vice versa, and anything that can be said of sentences can also be said of utterances, but not necessarily vice versa. We have already seen an example of this when we said it was sensible to talk of a sentence being in a particular language, and also sensible to talk of an utterance being in a particular language, although one cannot talk of a proposition being in a particular language.

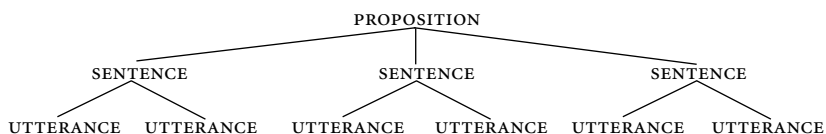
Practice (1) Fill in the chart below with ‘+’ or ‘–’ as appropriate. Thus, for example, if it makes sense to think of a proposition being in a particular regional accent, put a ‘+’ in the appropriate box; if not, put a ‘–’.

	Utterances	Sentences	Propositions
Can be loud or quiet			
Can be grammatical or not			
Can be true or false			
In a particular regional accent			
In a particular language			

- (2) Can the same proposition be expressed by different sentences? *Yes / No*
(3) Can the same sentence be realized by different utterances
(i.e. have different utterances as tokens)? *Yes / No*

Feedback	(1) + – – (2) Yes (3) Yes + + – + + + + – – + + –
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Comment It is useful to envisage the kind of family tree relationship between these notions shown in the diagram. For example, a single proposition



could be expressed by using several different sentences (say, *Prince William will inherit the throne*, or *The throne will be inherited by Prince William*) and each of these sentences could be uttered an infinite number of times.

A proposition is an abstraction that can be grasped by the mind of an individual person. In this sense, a proposition is an object of thought. Do not equate propositions with thoughts, because thoughts are usually held to be private, personal, mental processes, whereas propositions are public in the sense that the same proposition is accessible to different persons: different individuals can grasp the same proposition. Furthermore, a proposition is not a process, whereas a thought can be seen as a process going on in an individual's mind. Unfortunately, of course, the word *thought* may sometimes be used loosely in a way which includes the notion of a proposition. For instance, one may say, 'The same thought came into both our heads at the same time.' In this case, the word *thought* is being used in a sense quite like that of the word *proposition*. The relationship between mental processes (e.g. thoughts), abstract semantic entities (e.g. propositions), linguistic entities (e.g. sentences), and actions (e.g. utterances) is problematic and complicated, and we will not go into the differences further here.

Summary These comments are impressionistic and simplified, but we believe that they will give a beginning student in semantics an idea of the kind of motivation behind the semanticist's careful distinction between utterances, sentences, and propositions.

We have introduced a notational way of distinguishing between sentences (italic typeface) and utterances (single quotation marks). Note that we have as yet shown no way of representing propositions. One possible way will be shown in the units on logic.

Unit 2 Study Guide and Exercises

Directions After you have read Unit 2 you should be able to tackle the following questions to test your understanding of the main ideas raised in the unit.

- 1 You should understand these terms and concepts from this unit:

sentence	declarative sentence
utterance	interrogative sentence
proposition	imperative sentence

- 2 Is semantics concerned only with complete sentences? Explain.
- 3 Indicate the conventions used in the text to distinguish a **sentence** from an **utterance**. Give an illustration of each.
- 4 Indicate whether each of the following sentence pairs expresses the **same** or **different** propositions.
 - a Mary read the book / The book was read by Mary
 - b Fred took back the book / Fred took the book back
 - c The cat chased the rat / The cat was chased by the rat
 - d The chef cooked the meal / The chef had the meal cooked
 - e Hondas are easy to fix / It's easy to fix Hondas
- 5 Explain the following from the text (p. 22): 'Normally, when a speaker utters a simple declarative sentence, he commits himself to the truth of the corresponding proposition: i.e. he asserts the proposition. By uttering a simple interrogative or imperative, a speaker can mention a particular proposition, without asserting its truth.'
- 6 In each of the following, indicate whether a proposition is asserted or not.
 - a John left yesterday
 - b Did John leave yesterday?
 - c Can John leave this afternoon?
 - d John, get out of here
 - e John!
- 7 Decide whether each pair of sentences below has the same or different propositional content. If they have the same propositional content, identify the proposition that they both share.
 - a Can John have some cake? / John has some cake
 - b Take out the garbage / You will take out the garbage
 - c Can you pass the salt? / The salt shaker is nearly empty
- 8 Utterances can be loud or quiet, in a particular regional accent, and in a particular language. Can you think of other characteristics of utterances?