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## SEMANTICS

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Semantics – the study of meaning – can be approached from different directions. One view is that meaning consists essentially of events which are psychological, private and invisible. An alternative view is that meaning can be studied via language use, and therefore via events which are social, public and observable.

Semantics has often been thought of as an essentially 'philosophical' problem area, in the stereotypical sense that it involves sitting quietly and thinking deeply and logically about mental events. I will briefly discuss standard arguments within this tradition, some of which have a very long history (e.g. that the meaning of linguistic signs is conventional). Other standard arguments (e.g. that words acquire their meanings from their relations to other words in the language system) and standard concepts (e.g. reference, denotation, connotation, prototypes, compositionality) are required in any approach, but sometimes require revision in the light of data on language use.

Alternative traditions take a social approach to semantics, and try to make a connection between meaning and communication. The 1960s saw the development of speech act theory – which was itself an attempt to solve traditional philosophical problems – but which points the way to a theory of meaning as part of a theory of social action. The 1980s saw the development of an empirical semantics, which is based on data from attested language use. These two developments come together in an approach often referred to by the rough slogan that 'meaning is use' (more accurately: recurrent use provides observable evidence of meaning). This approach makes it impossible to distinguish sharply between semantics (the study of meaning) and pragmatics (the study of language use).

This empirical tradition was made possible by the easy availability, from the 1990s onwards, of computer-readable collections of authentic texts, which nowadays often consist of tens of thousands of texts and of hundreds of millions of running words. I will give brief examples of these empirical data and methods.