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ABSTRACT

For robots to navigate and interact more richly with the world around them, they will likely require a deeper *understanding* of the world in which they operate. In robotics and related research fields, the study of understanding is often referred to as semantics, which dictates *what does the world “mean” to a robot*, and is strongly tied to the question of *how to represent that meaning*. With humans and robots increasingly operating in the same world, the prospects of human–robot interaction also bring *semantics and ontology of natural language* into the picture. Driven by need, as well as by enablers like increasing availability of training data and computational resources, semantics is

Sourav Garg, Niko Sünderhauf, Feras Dayoub, Douglas Morrison, Akansel Cosgun, Gustavo Carneiro, Qi Wu, Tat-Jun Chin, Ian Reid, Stephen Gould, Peter Corke and Michael Milford (2020), “Semantics for Robotic Mapping, Perception and Interaction: A Survey”, Foundations and Trends[®] in Robotics: Vol. 8, No. 1–2, pp 1–224. DOI: 10.1561/23000000059.

a rapidly growing research area in robotics. The field has received significant attention in the research literature to date, but most reviews and surveys have focused on particular aspects of the topic: the technical research issues regarding its use in specific robotic topics like mapping or segmentation, or its relevance to one particular application domain like autonomous driving. A new treatment is therefore required, and is also timely because so much relevant research has occurred since many of the key surveys were published. This survey therefore provides an overarching snapshot of where semantics in robotics stands today. We establish a taxonomy for semantics research in or relevant to robotics, split into four broad categories of activity, in which semantics are extracted, used, or both. Within these broad categories we survey dozens of major topics including fundamentals from the computer vision field and key robotics research areas utilizing semantics, including mapping, navigation and interaction with the world. The survey also covers key practical considerations, including enablers like increased data availability and improved computational hardware, and major application areas where semantics is or is likely to play a key role. In creating this survey, we hope to provide researchers across academia and industry with a comprehensive reference that helps facilitate future research in this exciting field.

1

Introduction

For robots to move beyond the niche environments of fulfilment warehouses, underground mines and manufacturing plants into widespread deployment in industry and society, they will need to understand the world around them. Most mobile robot and drone systems deployed today make relatively little use of explicit higher level “meaning” and typically only consider geometric maps of environments, or three dimensional models of objects in manufacturing and logistics contexts. Despite considerable success and uptake to date, there is a large range of domains with few, if any, commercial robotic deployments; for example: aged care and assisted living facilities, autonomous on-road vehicles, and drones operating in close proximity to cluttered, human-filled environments. Many challenges remain to be solved, but we argue one of the most significant is simply that robots will need to better *understand* the world in which they operate, in order for them to move into useful and safe deployments in more diverse environments. This need for *understanding* is where *semantics* meet robotics.

Semantics is a widely used term, not just in robotics but across fields ranging from linguistics to philosophy. In the robotics domain, despite widespread *usage* of semantics, there is relatively little formal

definition of what the term means. In this survey, we aim to provide a taxonomy rather than specific definition of semantics, and note that the surveyed research exists along a spectrum from traditional, non-semantic approaches to those which are primarily semantically-based. Broadly speaking, we can consider semantics in a robotics context to be about the *meaning* of things: the meaning of places, objects, other entities occupying the environment, or even the language used in communicating between robots and humans or between robots themselves. There are several areas of relevance to robotics where semantics have been a strong focus in recent years, including SLAM (Simultaneous Localization And Mapping), segmentation and object recognition.

Given the importance of semantics for robotics, how can they be equipped, or learn about meaning in the world? There are multiple methods, but they can be split into two categories. Firstly, *provided semantics* describes situations where the robot is given the knowledge beforehand. *Learnt semantics* describes situations where the robot, either beforehand or during deployment, learns this information. The learning mechanism leads to further sub categorization: learning from observation of the entities of interest in the environment, and actual interaction with the entities of interest, such as through manipulation. Learning can occur in a supervised, unsupervised or semi-supervised manner.

Semantics as a research field in robotics has grown rapidly in the past decade. This growth has been driven in part by the opportunity to use semantics to improve the capabilities of robotic systems in general, but several other factors have also contributed. The popularization of deep learning over the past decade has facilitated much of the research in semantics for robotics, enabling capabilities like high performance general object recognition – *object class* is an important and useful “meaning” associated with the world. Increases in dataset availability, access to the cloud and compute resources have also been critical, providing a much richer source of information from which robots can learn, and the computational power with which to do so, rapidly and at scale. Given the popularity of the field, it has been the focus of a number of key review and survey papers, which we cover here.

1.1 Past Coverage Including Survey and Review Papers

As one of the core fields of research in robotics, SLAM has been the subject of a number of reviews, surveys and tutorials over the past few decades, including coverage of semantic concepts. A recent review of SLAM by Cadena *et al.* [1] positioned itself and other existing surveys as belonging to either classical [2]–[5], algorithmic-analysis [6] or the “robust perception” age [1]. This review highlighted the evolution of SLAM, from its earlier focus on probabilistic formulations and analyses of fundamental properties to the current and growing focus on robustness, scalability and high-level understanding of the environment – where semantics comes to the fore. Also discussed were robustness and scalability in the context of long-term autonomy and how the underlying representation models, metric *and* semantic, shape the SLAM problem formulation. For the high-level semantic representation and understanding of the environment, [1] discussed literature where SLAM is used for inferring semantics, and semantics are used to improve SLAM, paving the way for a joint optimization-based semantic SLAM system. They further highlight the key challenges of such a system, including consistent fusion of semantic and metric information, task-driven semantic representations, dynamic adaptation to changes in the environment, and effective exploitation of semantic reasoning.

Kostavelis and Gasteratos [7] reviewed semantic mapping for mobile robotics. They categorized algorithms according to scalability, inference model, temporal coherence and topological map usage, while outlining their potential applications and emphasizing the role of human interaction, knowledge representation and planning. More recently, [8] reviewed current progress in SLAM research, proposing that SLAM including semantic components could evolve into “Spatial AI”, either in the form of autonomous AI, such as a robot, or as Intelligent Augmentation (IA), such as in the form of an AR headset. A Spatial AI system would not only capture and represent the scene intelligently but also take into account the embodied device’s constraints, thus requiring joint innovation and co-design of algorithms, processors and sensors. More recently, [9] presented Gaussian Belief Propagation (GBP) as an algorithmic framework suited to the needs of a Spatial AI system, capable of

delivering high performance despite resource constraints. The proposals in both [8] and [9] are significantly motivated by rapid developments in processor hardware, and touch on the opportunities for closing the gap between intelligent perception and resource-constrained deployment devices. More recently, [10] surveyed the use of semantics for visual SLAM, particularly reviewing the integration of “semantic extractors” (object recognition and semantic segmentation) within modern visual SLAM pipelines.

Much of the growth in semantics-based approaches has coincided with the increase in capabilities brought about by the modern deep learning revolution. Schmidhuber [11] presented a detailed review of deep learning in neural networks as applied through supervised, unsupervised and reinforcement learning regimes. They introduced the concept of “Credit Assignment Paths” (CAPs) representing chains of causal links between events, which help understand the level of depth required for a given Neural Network (NN) application. With a vision of creating general purpose learning algorithms, they highlighted the need for a brain-like learning system following the rules of fractional neural activation and sparse neural connectivity. Liu *et al.* [12] presented a more focused review of deep learning, surveying generic object detection. They highlighted the key elements involved in the task such as the accuracy–efficiency trade-off of detection frameworks, the choice and evolution of backbone networks, the robustness of object representation and reasoning based on additionally available context.

A significant body of work has focused on extracting more meaningful abstractions of the raw data typically obtained in robotics such as 3D point clouds. Towards this end, a number of surveys have been conducted in recent years for point cloud filtering [13] and description [14], 3D shape/object classification [15], [16], 3D object detection [15]–[19], 3D object tracking [16] and 3D semantic segmentation [15]–[17], [20]–[24]. With only a couple of exceptions, all of these surveys have particularly reviewed the use of *deep learning* on 3D point clouds for respective tasks. Segmentation has also long been a fundamental component of many robotic and autonomous vehicle systems, with *semantic* segmentation focusing on labeling areas or pixels in an image by class type. In particular the overall goal is to label by class, not by instance. For example,

in an autonomous vehicle context this goal constitutes labeling pixels as belonging to a vehicle, rather than as a specific instance of a vehicle (although that is also an important capability). The topic has been the focus of a large quantity of research with resulting survey papers that focus primarily on semantic segmentation, such as [22], [25]–[30].

Beyond these flagship domains, semantics have also been investigated in a range of other subdomains. Ramirez-Amaro *et al.* [31] reviewed the use of semantics in the context of understanding human actions and activities, to enable a robot to execute a task. They classified semantics-based methods for *recognition* into four categories: syntactic methods based on symbols and rules, affordance-based understanding of objects in the environment, graph-based encoding of complex variable relations, and knowledge-based methods. In conjunction with recognition, different methods to *learn and execute* various tasks were also reviewed including learning by demonstration, learning by observation and execution based on structured plans. Likewise for the service robotics field, [32] presented a survey of vision-based semantic mapping, particularly focusing on its need for an effective human–robot interface for service robots, beyond pure navigation capabilities. Paulius and Sun [33] also surveyed knowledge representations in service robotics.

Many robots are likely to require image retrieval capabilities where semantics may play a key role, including in scenarios where humans are interacting with the robotic systems. Enser and Sandom [34] and Liu *et al.* [35] surveyed the “semantic gap” in current content-based image retrieval systems, highlighting the discrepancy between the limited descriptive power of low-level image features and the typical richness of (human) user semantics. Bridging this gap is likely to be important for both improved robot capabilities *and* better interfaces with humans. Some of the reviewed approaches to reducing the semantic gap, as discussed in [35], include the use of object ontology, learning meaningful associations between image features and query concepts and learning the user’s intention by relevance feedback. This semantic gap concept has gained significant attention and is reviewed in a range of other papers including [36]–[42]. Acting upon the enriched understanding of the scene, robots are also likely to require sophisticated grasping capabilities, as reviewed in [43], covering vision-based robotic grasping in

the context of object localization, pose estimation, grasp detection and motion planning. Enriched interaction with the environment based on an understanding of what can be done with an object – its “affordances” – is also important, as reviewed in [44]. Enriched interaction with humans is also likely to require an understanding of language, as reviewed recently by [45]. This review covers some of the key elements of language usage by robots: collaboration via dialogue with a person, language as a means to drive learning and understanding natural language requests, and deployment, as shown in application examples.

1.2 Summary and Rationale for This Survey

The majority of semantics coverage in the literature to date has occurred with respect to a specific research topic, such as SLAM or segmentation, or targeted to specific application areas, such as autonomous vehicles. As can be seen in the previous subsection, there has been both extensive research across these fields as well as a number of key survey and review papers summarizing progress to date. These deep dives into specific sub-areas in robotics can provide readers with a deep understanding of technical considerations regarding semantics in that context. As the field continues to grow however there is increasing need for an overview that more broadly covers semantics across all of robotics, whilst still providing sufficient technical coverage to be of use to practitioners working in these fields. For example, while [1] extensively considers the use of semantics primarily within SLAM research, there is a need to cover the role of semantics more broadly in various robotics tasks and competencies which are closely related to each other. The task, “bring a cup of coffee”, likely requires semantic understanding borne out of both the underlying SLAM system *and* the affordance-grasping pipeline. This survey therefore goes beyond specific application domains or methodologies to provide an overarching survey of semantics across all of robotics, as well as the semantics-enabling research that occurs in related fields like computer vision and machine learning. To encompass such a broad range of topics in this survey, we have divided our coverage of research relating to semantics into (a) the fundamentals underlying the current and potential use of semantics in robotics, (b) the widespread

use of semantics in robotic mapping and navigation systems, and (c) the use of semantics to enhance the range of interactions robots have with the world, with humans, and with other robots.

This survey is also motivated by timeliness: the use of semantics is a rapidly evolving area, due to both significant current interest in this field, as well as technological advances in local and cloud compute, and the increasing availability of data that is critical to developing or training these semantic systems. Consequently, with many of the key papers now half a decade old or more, it is useful to capture a snapshot of the field as it stands now, and to update the treatment of various topic areas based on recently proposed paradigms. For example, this survey discusses recent semantic mapping paradigms that mostly post-date key papers by [1], [7], such as combining single- and multi-view point clouds with semantic segmentation to directly obtain a local semantic map [46]–[50]. Whilst contributing a new overview of the use of semantics across robotics in general, we are also careful to adhere where possible to recent proposed taxonomies in specific research areas. For example, in the area of 3D point clouds and their usage for semantics, within Subsection 3.3, with the help of key representative papers, we *briefly* describe the recent research evolution of using 3D point cloud representations for learning object- or pixel-level semantic labeling, in line with the taxonomy proposed by existing comprehensive surveys [15]–[17], [22], [23]. Finally, beyond covering new high level conceptual developments, there is also the need to simply update the paper-level coverage of what has been an incredibly large volume of research in these fields even over the past five years. The survey refers to well over 100 research works from the past year alone, representative of a much larger total number of research works. This breadth of coverage would normally come at the cost of some depth of coverage: here we have attempted to cover the individual topics in as much detail as possible, with over 900 referenced works covered in total. Where appropriate we also make reference to prior survey and review papers where further detailed coverage may be of interest, such as for the topic of 3D point clouds and their usage for semantics.

Moving beyond single application domains, we also provide an overview of how the use of semantics is becoming an increasingly integral part of many trial (and in some cases full scale commercial) deployments including in autonomous vehicles, service robotics and drones. A richer understanding of the world will open up opportunities for robotic deployments in contexts traditionally *too difficult* for safe robotic deployment: nowhere is this more apparent perhaps than for on-road autonomous vehicles, where a subtle, nuanced understanding of all aspects of the driving task is likely required before robot cars become comparable to, or ideally superior to, human drivers. Compute and data availability has also enabled many of the advancements in semantics-based robotics research; likewise these technological advances have also facilitated investigation of their deployment in robotic applications that previously would have been unthinkable – such as enabling sufficient on-board computation for deploying semantic techniques on power- and weight-limited drones. We cover the current and likely future advancements in computational technology relevant to semantics, both local and online versions, as well as the burgeoning availability of rich, informative datasets that can be used for training semantically-informed systems.

In summary, this survey aims to provide a unifying overview of the development and use of semantics across the entire robotics field, covering as much detailed work as feasible whilst referencing the reader to further details where appropriate. Beyond its breadth, the survey represents a substantial update to the semantics topics covered in survey and review papers published even only a few years ago. By surveying the technical research, the application domains and the technology enablers in a single treatment of the field, we can provide a unified snapshot of what is possible now and what is likely to be possible in the near future.

1.3 Taxonomy and Survey Structure

Existing literature covering the role of *semantics* in robotics is fragmented and is usually discussed in a variety of task- and application-specific contexts. In this survey, we consolidate the disconnected

semantics research in robotics; draw links with the fundamental computer vision capabilities of extracting semantic information; cover a range of potential applications that typically require high-level decision making; and discuss critical upcoming enhancers for improving the scope and use of semantics. To aid in navigating this rapidly growing and already sizable field, here we propose a taxonomy of semantics as it pertains to robotics (see Figure 1.1). We find the relevant literature can be divided into four broad categories:

1. *Static or Un-embodied Scene Understanding*, where the focus of research is typically on developing intrinsic capability to extract semantic information from images, for example, object recognition and image classification. The majority of research in this direction uses single image-based 2D input to infer the underlying semantic or 3D content of that image. However, image acquisition and processing in this case is primarily static in nature (including videos shot by a static camera), separating it conceptually from a mobile embodied agent's dynamic perception of the environment due to motion of the agent. Because RGB cameras are widely used in robotics, and the tasks being performed, such as object recognition, are also performed by robots, advances in this area are relevant to robotics research. In Section 2, we introduce the fundamental components of semantics that relate to or enable robotics, focusing on topics that have been primarily or initially investigated in non-robotics but related research fields, such as computer vision. We cover the key components of semantics as regards object detection, segmentation, scene representations and image retrieval, all highly relevant capabilities for robotics, even if not all the work has yet been demonstrated on robotic platforms.
2. *Mobile Environment Understanding and Mapping*, where the research is typically motivated by the mobile or dynamic nature of robots and their surroundings. The research literature in this category includes the task of semantic mapping, which could be topological, or a dense and precise 3D reconstruction. These mapping tasks can often leverage advances in static scene understanding research, for example, place categorization (image classification)

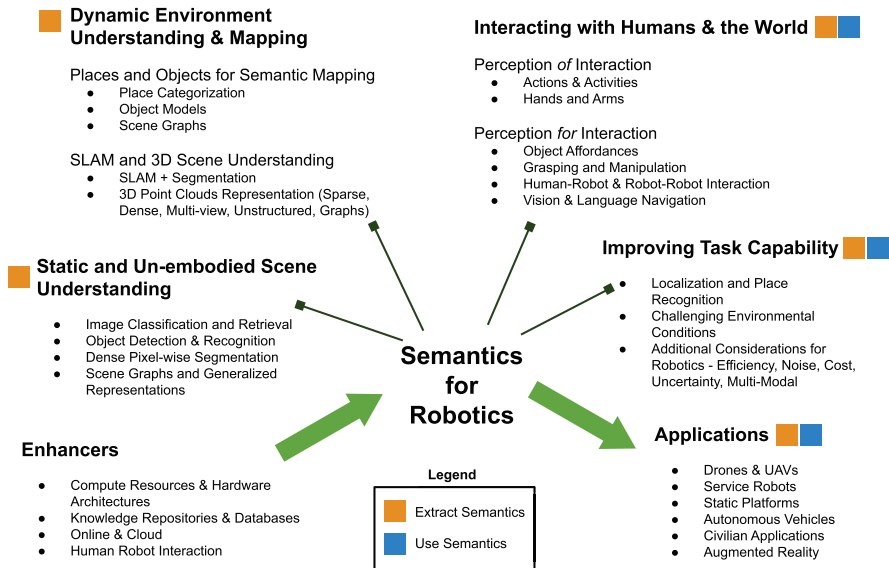


Figure 1.1: A taxonomy for semantics in robotics. Four broad categories of semantics research are complemented by technological, knowledge and training-related enhancers and lead to a range of robotic applications. Areas can be primarily involved in extracting semantics, using semantics or a combination of both.

forming the basis of semantic topological mapping, or pixel-wise semantic segmentation being used as part of a semantic 3D reconstruction pipeline. Semantic maps provide a representation of information and understanding at an environment or spatial level. With the increasing use of 3D sensing devices, along with the maturity of visual SLAM, research on semantic understanding of 3D point clouds is also growing, aimed at enabling a richer semantic representation of the 3D world. In Section 3, we cover the use of semantics for developing representations and understanding at an environment level. This includes the use of places, objects and scene graphs for semantic mapping, and 3D scene understanding through Simultaneous Localization And Mapping (SLAM) and point clouds processing.

3. *Interaction*, where the existing research “connects the dots” between the ability to *perceive* and the ability to *act*. The literature

in this space can be further divided into the “perception *of* interaction” and “perception *for* interaction”. The former includes the basic abilities of understanding actions and activities of humans and other dynamic agents, and enabling robots to learn from demonstration. The latter encompasses research related to the use of the perceived information to act or perform a task, for example, developing a manipulation strategy for a detected object. In the context of robotics, detecting an object’s affordances can be as important as recognizing that object, enabling semantic reasoning relevant to the task and affordances (e.g., “cut” and “contain”) rather than to the specific object category (e.g., “knife” and “jar”). While object grasping and manipulation relate to a robot’s interaction with the environment, research on interaction with other *humans* and *robots* includes the use of natural language to generate inverse semantics, or to follow navigation instructions. Section 4 addresses the use of semantics to facilitate robot interaction with the world, as well as with the humans and robots that inhabit that world. It looks at key issues around affordances, grasping, manipulation, higher-level goals and decision making, human–robot interaction and vision-and-language navigation.

4. *Improving Task Capability*, where researchers have focused on utilizing semantic representations to improve the capability of other tasks. This includes for example the use of semantics for high-level reasoning to improve localization and visual place recognition techniques. Furthermore, semantic information can be used to solve more challenging problems such as dealing with challenging environmental conditions. Robotics researchers have also focused on techniques that unlock the full potential of semantics in robotics, since existing research has not always been motivated by or had to deal with the challenges of real world robotic applications, by addressing challenges like noise, clutter, cost, uncertainty and efficiency. In Section 5, we discuss various ways in which researchers extract or employ semantic representations for localization and visual place recognition, dealing with challenging environmental

conditions, and generally enabling semantics in a robotics context through addressing additional challenges.

The four broad categories presented above encompass the relevant literature on how semantics are defined or used in various contexts in robotics and related fields. This is also reflected in Figure 1.1 through “extract semantics” and “use semantics” labels associated with different sections of the taxonomy. Extracting semantics from images, videos, 3D point clouds, or by actively traversing an environment are all methods of creating semantic representations. Such semantic representations can be input into high-level reasoning and decision-making processes, enabling execution of complex tasks such as path planning in a crowded environment, pedestrian intention prediction, and vehicle trajectory prediction. Moreover, the use of semantics is often fine-tuned to particular applications like agricultural robotics, autonomous driving, augmented reality and UAVs. Rather than simply being exploited, the semantic representations themselves can be jointly developed and defined in consideration of how they are then used. Hence, in Figure 1.1, the sections associated with “use semantics” are also associated with “extract semantics”. These high-level tasks can benefit from advances in fundamental and applied research related to semantics. But this research alone is not enough: advances in other areas are critical, such as better cloud infrastructure, advanced hardware architectures and compute capability, and the availability of large datasets and knowledge repositories. Section 6 reviews the influx of semantics-based approaches for robotic deployments across a wide range of domains, as well as the critical technology enablers underpinning much of this current and future progress. Finally, Section 7 discusses some of the key remaining challenges in the field and opportunities for addressing them through future research, concluding coverage of what is likely to remain an exciting and highly active research area into the future.

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