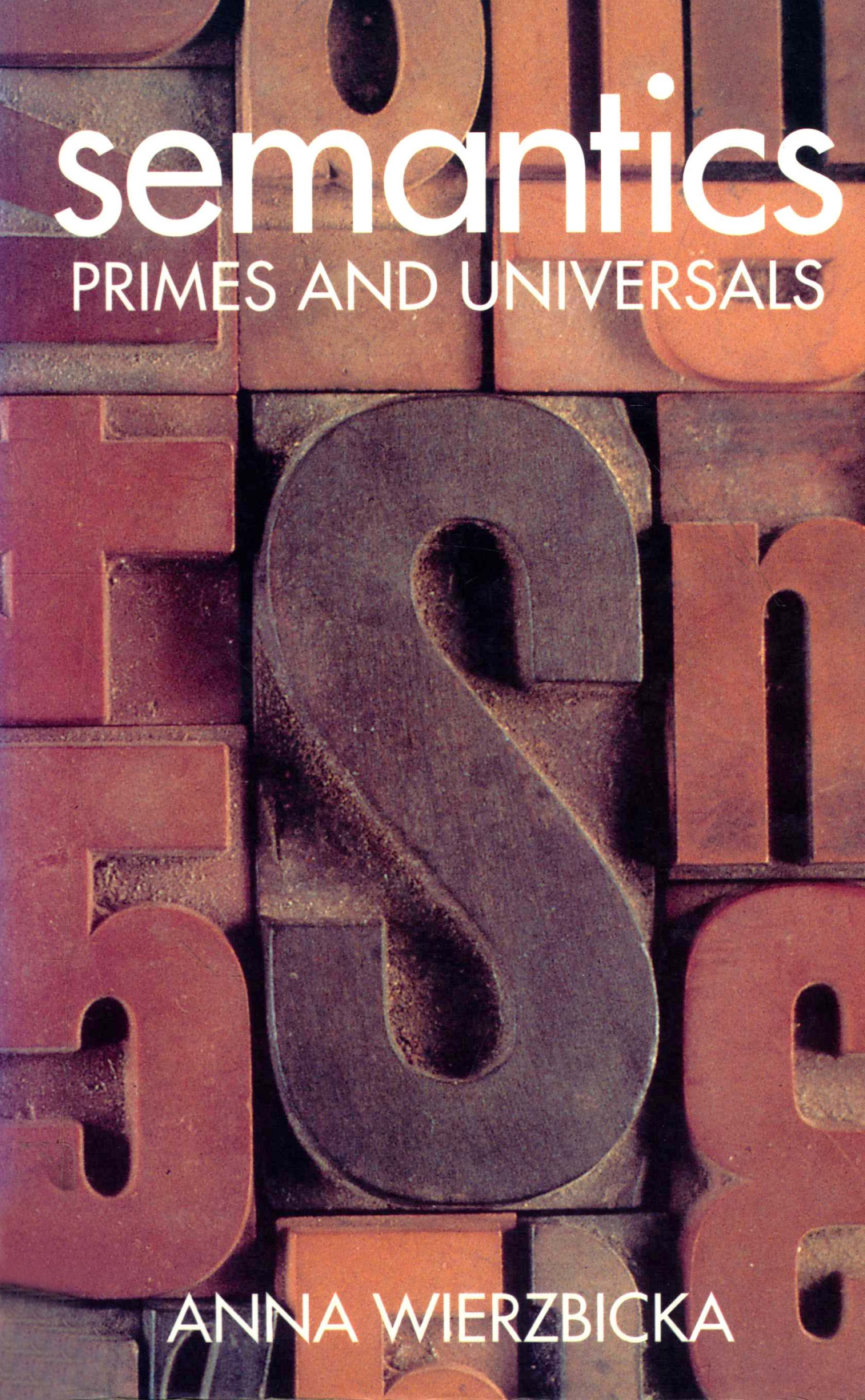
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PRIMES AND UNIVERSALS
ANNA WIERZBICKA

SEMANTICS

Primes and Universals

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Semantic Primitives and Semantic Fields. In Adrienne Lehrer and Eva Feder Kittay (eds.). *Frames, Fields, and Contrasts: New Essays in Semantic and Lexical Organization.* Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. 1992. 209–27.

Semantic Complexity: Conceptual Primitives and the Principle of Substitutability. *Theoretical Linguistics.* 17. 1991. 75–97.

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The Meaning of Colour Terms: Semantics, Culture, and Cognition. *Cognitive Linguistics.* 1/1. 1990. 99–150.

Dictionaries versus Encyclopaedias: How to Draw the Line. In Philip Davis (ed.). *Descriptive and Theoretical Modes in the Alternative Linguistics.* Philadelphia/ Amsterdam: John Benjamins. Forthcoming.

What is a Life Form? Conceptual Issues in Ethnobiology. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 2/1. 1992. 3–29.

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The Semantics of Grammar: A Reply to Professor Palmer. *Journal of Linguistics.* 27/2. 1991. 495–8.

A Semantic Basis for Grammatical Typology. In Werner Abraham, Talmy Givon, and Sandra Thompson (eds.). *Discourse, Grammar and Typology.* Complementary Series of Studies in Language. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. 179–209.

Semantics and Epistemology: The Meaning of 'Evidentials' in a Cross-linguistic Perspective. *Language Sciences.* 16/1. 1994. 81–137.

Contents

I General Issues

1 Introduction

1. Language and Meaning

Language is an instrument for conveying meaning. The structure of this instrument reflects its function, and it can only be properly understood in terms of its function. To study language without reference to meaning is like studying road signs from the point of view of their physical properties (how much they weigh, what kind of paint are they painted with, and so on), or like studying the structure of the eye without any reference to seeing.

Curiously, however, this is precisely how many linguists study language. A science of language in which meaning has at best a very marginal place is an anomaly and an aberration (which in itself will present an absorbing topic of study for the future historians of linguistics); and of course not all present-day linguists approach the study of language in that spirit. Yet in university curricula currently adopted in many linguistics departments throughout the world, "formal syntax" still occupies a far more central place than semantics (the study of meaning), and semantics is still often treated as marginal.

Two twentieth-century American linguists have been particularly influential in shaping a "linguistics without meaning": Leonard Bloomfield and Noam Chomsky.

Bloomfield (unlike his great contemporary and co-founder of American linguistics, Edward Sapir) was afraid of meaning, and was eager to relegate the study of meaning to other disciplines such as sociology or psychology. The reason he was afraid of it was that he wanted to establish linguistics as a science and that he thought that meaning couldn't be studied with the same rigour as linguistic sounds and forms. Bloomfield's behaviourism made him find all references to ideas, concepts, thoughts, or mind unscientific; "mentalism" was used by him, and by many other influential linguists of his generation, as a dirty word.[1] As Randy Allen Harris, the author of *The Linguistics Wars* (1993: 27–8), put it: "Bloomfield's ideas defined the temper of the linguistic times: that it [linguistics] was a descriptive and

[1] As a close collaborator of Sapir, Morris Swadesh (1941: 59), pointed out, another confirmed behaviourist, Twaddell, "criticized Sapir as a mentalist dealing with an 'unknown and unknowable mind' ".

taxonomic science, like zoology, geology, and astronomy; that mental speculations were tantamount to mysticism, an abandonment of science; that all the relevant psychological questions (learning, knowing, and using a language) would be answered by behaviorism; that meaning was outside the scope of scientific inquiry."

It has often been said, in Bloomfield's defence, that it wasn't Bloomfield himself but the "Bloomfieldians" or "post-Bloomfieldians" (and especially Chomsky's mentor Zeillig Harris) who sought to banish meaning from linguistics. For example, Matthews (1943: 114) points out that even "in one of his last general papers he [Bloomfield] continued to make clear that 'in language, forms cannot be separated from meanings' " (1943; in Hockett 1970: 401). But it is not unreasonable to say that what the Post-Bloomfieldians did was to take Bloomfield's largely (though not consistently) anti-semantic stand to its logical conclusion.

Matthews tries to explain why Bloomfield's successors "came to believe that forms could and should be described without reference to meaning" and "why, in adopting a theory in which the separation of form and meaning was axiomatic, they were so sure they were continuing his work". He notes that the usual explanation given is "that however central meaning may have been and however important its investigation, Bloomfield's account of how it should be described effectively closed the door to scientific study" (1993: 115). Matthews seeks to distance himself from this conclusion but in my view it is inescapable.

Bloomfield didn't "reject" meaning in the sense of avoiding any mention of it in linguistic description but he did want to exclude semantic considerations from linguistic analysis. For example, he ridiculed the idea that the grammatical category of number (singular versus plural) has a semantic basis and could be defined with reference to meaning: "school grammar defines the class of plural nouns by its meaning 'more than one' (person, place, or thing), but who could gather from this that *oats* is a plural while *wheat* is a singular? Class-meanings, like all other meanings, elude the linguist's power of definition." (1933/1935: 266)[2]

Bloomfield himself denied that he had ever wanted to "undertake to study language without meaning, simply as meaningless sound" (letter to Fries; quoted in Hymes and Fought 1975: 1009); but the message of *Language* was none the less loud and clear: there was no room for semantics within the "linguistic science", at least not for the foreseeable future.

> We have defined the *meaning* of a linguistic form as the situation in which the speaker utters it and the response which it calls forth from the hearer. . . . The sit-

[2] Curiously, Bloomfield didn't pay any attention to the fact that *oats* is not a "plural" contrasting with a singular (like, for example, *dogs* contrasts with *dog*) and that it doesn't really belong to the same "form class" as *dogs* does. The "form class" to which *oats* belongs, and its invariant meaning, is discussed in Chapter 13. (See also Wierzbicka 1988.)

uations which prompt people to utter speech include every object and happening in their universe. In order to give a scientifically accurate definition of meaning for every form of a language, we should have to have a scientifically accurate knowledge of everything in the speakers' world. The actual extent of human knowledge is very small, compared to this. We can define the meaning of a speech-form accurately when this meaning has to do with some matter of which we possess scientific knowledge. We can define the names of minerals, for example, in terms of chemistry and mineralogy, as when we say that the ordinary meaning of the English word *salt* is 'sodium chloride (NaCl)', and we can define the names of plants or animals by means of the technical terms of botany or zoology, but we have no precise way of defining words like *love* or *hate*, which concern situations that have not been accurately classified—and these latter are in the great majority. . . .

The statement of meaning is therefore the weak point in language study, and will remain so until human knowledge advances very far beyond its present state. In practice, we define the meaning of a linguistic form, wherever we can, in terms of some other science. Where this is impossible, we resort to makeshift devices.[3] (Bloomfield 1933/1935: 139–40)

Thus, for Bloomfield meaning could be referred to, but not studied, and given his "anti-mentalistic", behaviouristic conception of meaning, it could scarcely have been otherwise.

As Hymes and Fought (1975: 1010) put it, "Bloomfield included meaning in his conception of language structure but not in his short-term linguistic theory. . . . scepticism as to the practical possibility of incorporating meaning explicitly in linguistic analysis led to shifts . . . to reliance on distributional patterning . . . among the Bloomfieldians."

The "cognitive revolution" of the late fifties and the sixties banished (or so it seemed) the ghost of behaviourism, and made mind, and meaning, a central concern of human sciences in general, and of linguistics in particular. To quote one of the main actors of the "cognitive revolution", Jerome Bruner (1990: 1): "That revolution was intended to bring 'mind' back into the human sciences after a long cold winter of objectivism." For Bruner, "mind" is closely related to "meaning": "Now let me tell you first what I and my friends thought the revolution was about back there in the late 1950s. It was, we thought, an all-out effort to establish meaning as the central concept of psychology—not stimuli and responses, not overtly observable behavior, not biological drives and their transformation, but meaning" (p. 2). But, in his own words, Bruner's is not "the usual account of progress marching ever forward" (p. 1); for in his view, "that revolution has now been diverted into issues that are marginal to the impulse that brought it

[3] Bloomfield's reference to "NaCl" as "the ordinary meaning of the English word *salt*" highlights his failure to distinguish scientific knowledge from "ordinary meaning", as do also his remarks on the names of plants and animals. For detailed discussion of these matters see Chapters 11 and 12. As for the meaning of emotion terms (such as *love* and *hate*), see Chapter 5.

into being. Indeed, it has been technicalized in a manner that even undermines the original impulse" (p. 1). What has been lost sight of is meaning.

> Very early on, for example, emphasis began shifting from "meaning" to "information," from the *construction* of meaning to the *processing* of information. These are profoundly different matters. The key factor in the shift was the introduction of computation as the ruling metaphor and of computability as a necessary criterion of a good theoretical model. Information is indifferent with respect to meaning. (p. 4)
>
> Very soon, computing became the model of the mind, and in place of the concept of meaning there emerged the concept of computability. (p. 6)
>
> It was inevitable that with computation as the metaphor of the new cognitive science and with computability as the necessary if not sufficient criterion of a workable theory within the new science, the old malaise about mentalism would re-emerge. (p. 8)

Bruner decries the "cognitive revolution" for abandoning meaning as its central concern and for "opting for 'information processing' and computation instead" (137); and he urges "that psychology stop trying to be 'meaning-free' in its system of explanation" (20).

But if psychology has been betrayed by the "cognitive revolution", with its escape from meaning, what is one to say of linguistics, in which the promising early references to "mind" (as in Chomsky's *Language and Mind*), have led to a preoccupation with formalisms, and in which "meaning-free" syntax has for decades usurped the place rightfully belonging to the study of meaning? Oliver Sacks (1993: 48) summarizes the "hijacking" of the "cognitive revolution" as follows: "Bruner describes how this original impetus was subverted, and replaced by notions of computation, information processing, etc., and by the computational (and Chomskyan) notion that the syntax of a language could be separated from its semantics." Sacks strongly endorses Bruner's position, and comments: "From Boole, with his 'Laws of Thought' in the 1850s, to the pioneers of Artificial Intelligence at the present day, there has been a persistent notion that one may have an intelligence or a language based on pure logic, without anything so messy as 'meaning' being involved."

Unfortunately, as noted by Sacks, this persistent notion was shared by the main *spiritus movens* of the "cognitive revolution" in linguistics, Noam Chomsky, whose influence on the field can hardly be overestimated.

Despite his mentalist, anti-Bloomfieldian stand, in his attitude to meaning Chomsky remained (and still remains) a Bloomfieldian. Like Bloomfield, "he ... had a deep methodological aversion to meaning, and his work reinforced one of the key elements of the Bloomfieldian policy toward meaning: it had to be avoided in formal analysis" (R. A. Harris 1993: 99).