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# Word Meaning and Syntax

Approaches to the Interface

Stephen Wechsler

*argument structure*  
semantic role  
H/P/LG mapping  
*lexical semantics*  
polysemy LFC  
vagueness

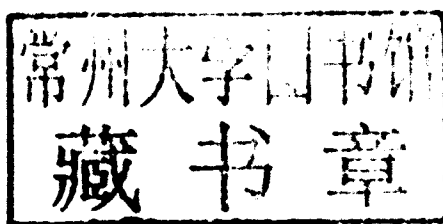
OXFORD SURVEYS IN SYNTAX AND MORPHOLOGY

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*Approaches to the Interface*

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STEPHEN WECHSLER



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## **Word Meaning and Syntax**

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## General preface

*Oxford Surveys in Syntax and Morphology* provides overviews of the major approaches to subjects and questions at the center of linguistic research in morphology and syntax. The volumes are accessible, critical, and up-to-date. Individually and collectively they aim to reveal the field's intellectual history and theoretical diversity. Each book published in the series will characteristically contain: (1) a brief historical overview of relevant research in the subject; (2) a critical presentation of approaches from relevant (but usually seen as competing) theoretical perspectives to the phenomena and issues at hand, including an objective evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of each approach to the central problems and issues; (3) a balanced account of the current issues, problems, and opportunities relating to the topic, showing the degree of consensus or otherwise in each case. The volumes will thus provide researchers and graduate students concerned with syntax, morphology, and related aspects of semantics with a vital source of information and reference.

*Word Meaning and Syntax: Approaches to the Interface* addresses some of the most important issues concerning the syntax–semantics interface in contemporary linguistic theory, namely those concerning predicate argument structure. It provides an excellent critical overview of many approaches to these topics, starting with a discussion of the nature of word meaning itself and presenting a pre-theoretical survey of the major phenomena in this domain before delving into the different theoretical analyses.

Robert D. Van Valin, Jr  
*General Editor*

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## Preface and acknowledgments

This book examines approaches to the interface between word meaning and syntax, focusing on the issue of how the arguments of verbs and other predicators are expressed in the syntax, an area generally known as ‘argument structure’ or ‘argument realization.’ The word ‘approaches’ in the book’s subtitle refers to the various theoretical frameworks for modeling and understanding that interface. But it also refers to the two fundamental sides from which one must approach the interface: from the word meaning side and from the syntax side. Or one might prefer to say: from the meaning side and the form side. Addressing the approach from the meaning side requires us to face an ancient question: what is the meaning of a word? The main aspects of that problem, including polysemy, vagueness, normativity, and pragmatic context, cannot be ignored when we turn to the syntax interface. So those issues are reviewed first, before we look at argument alternations, and then finally delve into specific proposals for the lexicon–syntax interface.

This book project started during a period that I spent as a visiting scholar at Stanford University in 2005, with the help of funding from a Faculty Research Assignment grant from the University of Texas. I am grateful to both institutions, and to the many people who helped out with the book, and people with whom I had conversations that helped shape my thinking. Beth Levin was especially important in the early stages of writing, providing guidance and commenting on some early chapter drafts. There are very few people with as much expertise and experience in this area as Beth has, and I am grateful to her for her help. I am fortunate to have as the series editor Robert Van Valin, who has written extensively on this area and was able to give very detailed and perceptive comments on many aspects of the book. Two anonymous reviewers gave valuable comments on the prospectus. Katrin Erk’s detailed feedback on Chapter 2 improved it greatly. John Beavers commented on the section on mereologies and affectedness, and we also discussed other aspects of the book. Stefan Müller is a co-author of Chapter 6, ‘The lexical–constructional debate,’ which is based on a paper we wrote that appeared as a target article in *Theoretical Linguistics* (the chapter appears here with the kind permission of the

journal). Stefan also generously read and reviewed other chapters of the book, and thereby saved me from making several errors. The people acknowledged in the *Theoretical Linguistics* article were also helping me with this book, perhaps without knowing it. These include Colin Bannard, Judith Meinschäfer, Frank Richter, and Dieter Wunderlich, who commented on a draft.

I am particularly grateful to my teacher, mentor, friend, and colleague Ivan Sag, who has been a major influence on my thinking in this area throughout my career. Ivan died in 2012, before this book was quite completed, and the field of linguistics is much the poorer for the loss. Ivan never stopped asking the important questions, and his answers shaped our understanding of syntax and its relation to semantics. In fact, the collaboration with Stefan Müller grew out of an online discussion initiated by Ivan. In addition to Ivan, Stefan, and myself, that discussion included Bill Croft, Charles Fillmore, Adele Goldberg, Paul Kay, and Jean-Pierre Koenig.

Students in my Fall 2010 seminar on Word Meaning (namely Telma Can Pixabaj, Luis Chacartegui, Zach Childers, Ashwini Ganeshan, Maggie Gemmell, Juwon Lee, Sandra Markarian, Charles Mignot, Michael Speriosu, I Nyoman Udayana, and Ahmed Zaheed) were subjected to drafts of Chapters 1 and 2. I have discussed various issues in this book with a number of other scholars, including Heidi Harley and Richard Larson.

The world's leading expert on the complex interactions between the writing of this book and my overall mood is my wife, Marie Carmel. I am grateful to Marie for her support, without which I might have given up a long time ago.



## List of abbreviations

ABS	absolute case
ACC	accusative case
ACT	Actor (in RRG)
AGT	agent
ANTIP	antipassive
APPL	applicative
ARG-ST	argument structure (in HPSG)
ASC	argument structure construction
ASP	aspect
AUX	auxiliary
AV	Actor voice (in Austronesian languages)
AVM	attribute-value matrix
C	complementizer
CAT	category
CAUS	causative
CG	Categorial Grammar
COMPL	completive aspect
COMPS	complement list (HPSG feature)
DAT	dative case
DEC	declarative
DEF	definite
DIR	directional
DN	derived nominal
DO	double object
DS	different subject
DTRS	daughters (HPSG feature)
ECM	exceptional case marking
ERG	ergative case
EXPL	expletive
F	feminine

FOC	focus
FUT	future
FV	final vowel
GEN	genitive case
GN	gerundive nominal
GPSG	Generalized Phrase Structure Grammar
HPSG	Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar
I.C.	Intrinsic Classification (in LMT)
iff	if and only if
IND	indicative
INF	infinitive
INGR	ingressive
INS	instrumental role or case
INTR	intransitive
IPFV	imperfective
LDG	Lexical Decomposition Grammar
LFG	Lexical-Functional Grammar
LMT	Lexical Mapping Theory
LOC	locative case
M	masculine
MaxEndpt	Maximal endpoint closed-scale adjective
MID	middle voice
MinEndpt	Minimal endpoint closed-scale adjective
MSE	Mapping to subevents
MSO	Mapping to subobjects
NFUT	non-future
NOM	nominative case
NPAST	non-past
OBJ	object
OBJ <sub>2</sub>	secondary object
OBL	oblique
OM	object marker
OV	Objective voice (in Austronesian languages)
PASS	passive
PAT	patient role

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PFV	perfective aspect
PHON	phonology
PL	plural
PO	prepositional object
POSS	possessor
PRED	predicate (LFG feature)
PRS	present
PST	past
PTCP	participle
REFL	reflexive
RN	relational noun
RRG	Role and Reference Grammar
SBCG	Sign-Based Construction Grammar
SC	small clause
SEML	semelfactive
SG	singular
SM	subject marker
SOA	State of affairs
SPR	specifier
SUBCAT	subcategorization list (HPSG feature)
SUBJ	subject
TAG	Tree-Adjoining Grammar
TOP	topic
TR	transitive
UND	Undergoer (in RRG)

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# The role of word meaning in syntax

## 1.1 The syntax–lexicon interface

Syntax, the system of rules for combining words into sentences, is greatly influenced by the meanings of those words. But the exact nature of this interface between word meaning and syntax remains one of the most controversial and elusive issues in contemporary linguistics. To understand the relationship between word meaning and syntax we first devise appropriate ways of modeling each of these two relata, and then proceed to explore the relation between those two models. Each side of the interface, word meaning and syntax, presents its own challenges. Syntax is probably more amenable to definitive statements of empirical fact. It is easy to show, based on an examination of written or spoken corpora, that in English a verb precedes its object while in Japanese a verb follows its object. Although there are various alternative ways to model syntax, there is little disagreement that these are important facts about the syntax of the respective languages. But unlike syntax, where we can consult the acoustic signal or the order of written words on a page, word meaning has no physical manifestation and is accessible mainly through the introspective judgments of speakers. When it comes to word meaning, there is often disagreement about the facts. Even before bringing syntax into the picture, word meaning is already a complex relation between language and the world it represents.

Syntax may be defined as the grammatical system for combining words into utterances, so syntax in this broad sense includes phrase structure, morphosyntax, and compositional semantics. While the study of word meaning has always been an important part of linguistics, it is the combinatorial system of syntax that began to receive a new level of attention and analysis with the advent of generative grammar. Chomsky's (1957) monograph *Syntactic Structures* demonstrated that