Oxford Introductions to Language Study

Series Editor H. G. Widdowson

Semantics

A. P. Cowie

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Preface

Purpose

What justification might there be for a series of introductions to language study? After all, linguistics is already well served with introductory texts: expositions and explanations which are comprehensive, authoritative, and excellent in their way. Generally speaking, however, their way is the essentially academic one of providing a detailed initiation into the discipline of linguistics, and they tend to be lengthy and technical: appropriately so, given their purpose. But they can be quite daunting to the novice. There is also a need for a more general and gradual introduction to language: transitional texts which will ease people into an understanding of complex ideas. This series of introductions is designed to serve this need.

Their purpose, therefore, is not to supplant but to support the more academically oriented introductions to linguistics: to prepare the conceptual ground. They are based on the belief that it is an advantage to have a broad map of the terrain sketched out before one considers its more specific features on a smaller scale, a general context in reference to which the detail makes sense. It is sometimes the case that students are introduced to detail without it being made clear what it is a detail *of*. Clearly, a general understanding of ideas is not sufficient: there needs to be closer scrutiny. But equally, close scrutiny can be myopic and meaningless unless it is related to the larger view. Indeed it can be said that the precondition of more particular enquiry is an awareness of what, in general, the particulars are about. This series is designed to provide this large-scale view of different

areas of language study. As such it can serve as preliminary to (and precondition for) the more specific and specialized enquiry which students of linguistics are required to undertake.

But the series is not only intended to be helpful to such students. There are many people who take an interest in language without being academically engaged in linguistics *per se*. Such people may recognize the importance of understanding language for their own lines of enquiry, or for their own practical purposes, or quite simply for making them aware of something which figures so centrally in their everyday lives. If linguistics has revealing and relevant things to say about language, this should presumably not be a privileged revelation, but one accessible to people other than linguists. These books have been so designed as to accommodate these broader interests too: they are meant to be introductions to language more generally as well as to linguistics as a discipline.

Design

The books in the series are all cut to the same basic pattern. There are four parts: Survey, Readings, References, and Glossary.

Survey

This is a summary overview of the main features of the area of language study concerned: its scope and principles of enquiry, its basic concerns and key concepts. These are expressed and explained in ways which are intended to make them as accessible as possible to people who have no prior knowledge or expertise in the subject. The Survey is written to be readable and is uncluttered by the customary scholarly references. In this sense, it is simple. But it is not simplistic. Lack of specialist expertise does not imply an inability to understand or evaluate ideas. Ignorance means lack of knowledge, not lack of intelligence. The Survey, therefore, is meant to be challenging. It draws a map of the subject area in such a way as to stimulate thought and to invite a critical participation in the exploration of ideas. This kind of conceptual cartography has its dangers of course: the selection of what is significant, and the manner of its representation, will not be to the liking of everybody, particularly

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not, perhaps, to some of those inside the discipline. But these surveys are written in the belief that there must be an alternative to a technical account on the one hand and an idiot's guide on the other if linguistics is to be made relevant to people in the wider world.

Readings

Some people will be content to read, and perhaps re-read, the summary Survey. Others will want to pursue the subject and so will use the Survey as the preliminary for more detailed study. The Readings provide the necessary transition. For here the reader is presented with texts extracted from the specialist literature. The purpose of these Readings is quite different from the Survey. It is to get readers to focus on the specifics of what is said, and how it is said, in these source texts. Questions are provided to further this purpose: they are designed to direct attention to points in each text, how they compare across texts, and how they deal with the issues discussed in the Survey. The idea is to give readers an initial familiarity with the more specialist idiom of the linguistics literature, where the issues might not be so readily accessible, and to encourage them into close critical reading.

References

One way of moving into more detailed study is through the Readings. Another is through the annotated References in the third section of each book. Here there is a selection of works (books and articles) for further reading. Accompanying comments indicate how these deal in more detail with the issues discussed in the different chapters of the Survey.

Glossary

Certain terms in the Survey appear in bold. These are terms used in a special or technical sense in the discipline. Their meanings are made clear in the discussion, but they are also explained in the Glossary at the end of each book. The Glossary is cross-referenced to the Survey, and therefore serves at the same time as an index. This enables readers to locate the term and what it signifies in the more general discussion, thereby, in effect, using the Survey as a summary work of reference.

Use

The series has been designed so as to be flexible in use. Each title is separate and self-contained, with only the basic format in common. The four sections of the format, as described here, can be drawn upon and combined in different ways, as required by the needs, or interests, of different readers. Some may be content with the Survey and the Glossary and may not want to follow up the suggested References. Some may not wish to venture into the Readings. Again, the Survey might be considered as appropriate preliminary reading for a course in applied linguistics or teacher education, and the Readings more appropriate for seminar discussion during the course. In short, the notion of an introduction will mean different things to different people, but in all cases the concern is to provide access to specialist knowledge and stimulate an awareness of its significance. This series as a whole has been designed to provide this access and promote this awareness in respect to different areas of language study.

H. G. WIDDOWSON

Author's preface

This introductory book offers a short but comprehensive treatment of lexical semantics. It includes the study of the meaningful relationships between words, and the processes, among them metaphor, by which new words and new senses are developed. But it also embraces phraseology, a rapidly expanding area of study; the processes by which complex words (derivatives and compounds) are formed from simple words; and the analysis of words into meaningful components (such as 'adult' and 'non-adult'). In a final chapter there is discussion of the use of large corpora in lexical research and in dictionary-making.

I owe thanks to a number of people for help and encouragement at various stages in the book's progress. My thanks go first to Henry Widdowson, who has been a constant source of editorial support, exacting but also stimulating, from the very beginning. Second, I wish to thank Cristina Whitecross at Oxford University Press, both for her friendship and for help in improving the manuscript in its later stages. I am grateful, also, to Julia Sallabank, who earlier on gave much practical guidance. Above all, I wish to thank my wife Cabu for secretarial support and constant encouragement.

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SECTION I

Survey

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1
Words and meanings

> 'When I use a word', Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean neither more nor less.'
> 'The question is', said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean so many different things.'
>
> (Lewis Carroll. *Alice through the Looking Glass. Macmillan 1871*)

What words mean is not always easy to pin down. Meanings change over time, and people often use the same words to mean different things. But Alice was wise to be cautious, because Humpty Dumpty was wide of the mark. We should not be misled by the constant expansion of the vocabulary of English, or by the evident fact that individual words develop new meanings, into thinking that we can make any word mean anything we like. Apart from anything else, if the meaning is to be recognized by somebody else, it has to be related to an existing sense in some way or other. Words mean certain things by convention and this we have to respect, to some degree at least, if we want to put language to effective communicative use.

A second factor which limits the freedom we have to create new meanings—whether idiosyncratic or not—is a strong disposition on the part of speakers, when faced with a recurring situation or event, to deal with it in familiar language. Creativity in our use of words tends to be reserved for special occasions. By contrast, much-used words in well-worn meanings—often within conventional phrases—reflect our most ordinary domestic routines. We 'lay the table', 'dry the dishes', 'take in the mail', and 'put out the cat'.

As ordinary speakers of a language, of course, we are constantly brought up against our ignorance of specific meanings of **simple words**—those that consist of only one meaningful part (words in English like *glitch*, *butt*, *cypher*, *dross*, and so on). One reason for our difficulty is that leaving aside **onomatopoeic words**—those which like *cuckoo* and *rattle* are formed from a sound associated with the thing or action they refer to—the shapes of simple words, what they sound like or look like in writing, do not resemble what they mean.

The same point can be made with reference to words in other languages. *Fromage*, partly because of the long 'aah' and soft 'g' at the end, sounds much softer than *cheese*—a point that advertising copywriters have been quick to exploit. The fact remains, though, that some French cheeses are hard, and some English ones soft.

The essential arbitrariness between the written or spoken form of a word and its meaning is also illustrated by the story of the farmer leaning over his pigsty and remarking of its occupants: 'Ah, rightly is they called pigs!' Yet there is in fact no necessary connection between the smell and unpleasant feeding habits of the pig and the group of letters used to refer to it. This is borne out by listing the closely similar *big*, *dig*, *fig*, *jig*, *tig*, and *wig*, and possibly too by reflecting that, in Danish, *smukke pigges* means 'pretty girls'.

So we can see that the relationship between words and meanings is far from straightforward: when the words are short, the links are usually arbitrary. Moreover, we cannot, like Humpty Dumpty, simply make words mean anything we like, for they have conventionally accepted meanings, with new senses usually taking account of the ones that already exist. Of course, there are in English very many words whose meanings seem to be systematically connected to ways in which the words can be broken up. But of course these are not simple words: they are **complex words** such as *systematic* (a **derivative**) and *bookcase* (a **compound**). Both types will be dealt with in more detail in the next section, as a further step in exploring the complex relationships between words and meanings, words and words, and words and their meaningful components, which make up the subject of semantics.

Words, words, words

As soon as we embark on the study of semantics, we run up against the problem that we have to use words to talk about words, often in a technical sense rather different from the way they are used, rather more loosely, in ordinary conversation. The problem starts with the word 'word' itself! We can illustrate this by referring to a type of information about words that is commonly supplied in standard dictionaries. This is what we find if we refer to the entry for *write* in one well-known dictionary:

write ... (past '*wrote*'; past participle '*written*')

We do not need to understand the precise meaning of 'past participle' to realize that *wrote* and *written* are not additional items of vocabulary—as *writer*, say, or *write out* might be. On the contrary, they are modifications that we have to make to the verb *write* so that it will fit grammatically into various sentences. The use of '*wrote*', for example, normally requires some reference to the past, such as *I wrote to Bill yesterday*. By contrast, '*written*' can be combined with '*has*' or '*have*' to form the so-called perfect tense, like this: *I have already written to Bill*.

One way of capturing the difference is to say that there is one unchanging word—*write* (one constant **lexical item**) but that it takes on various 'forms' (has different **word-forms**) according to context. Notice finally that *write* has other forms, including '*writing*', but that as these are considered to be regular (i.e. of a kind that readers can work out for themselves) they are not spelt out in the dictionary.

I suggested above that, unlike '*wrote*' (say), *writer*, and *write out* were lexical items. They are indeed in various ways comparable to *write*. Many dictionaries will treat them in entries of their own, and they too, in parallel with *write*, have different, so-called **inflectional forms**, to suit the different contexts in which they function. Thus '*wrote out*' is the past tense form of *write out* and '*writers*' the 'plural form' of *writer*.

While we are clarifying the relationship between lexical items and their forms, we need to be aware of another distinction—the one between lexical and grammatical items. **Grammatical items**, also known as 'function words', form a relatively small part of

the vocabulary. And they break down into a small number of classes—such as the 'demonstratives' *this*, *that*, *these*, *those*—whose members are typically few and seldom added to. Lexical items, by contrast, form a very large group, which is constantly expanding. And, of course, while grammatical items are few in number compared with lexical items, they occur much more frequently. This lopsidedness reflects the fact that while the function of lexical items is to express meanings, grammatical items provide the necessary cement holding phrases and sentences together.

When I referred earlier to the typical absence of any connection between the meanings of words and the words themselves, I limited this restriction to the shortest and simplest vocabulary items, such as *write*, *part*, *word*, *sound*, and *light*. As a general rule, the restriction does not apply to more complex items, and specifically to any which are made up of a simple word and an ending of some kind (as *writer* is), or of two simple words (as *write out* is). The first type is called a derived word (or derivative), the second a compound word (or more simply, compound).

As a glance at even a medium-sized dictionary will confirm, the compound words embodying (say) *air*, such as *airfare*, *airline*, *airmail*, and so on, greatly exceed in number the meanings of the simple word itself. If we add to the compounds the number of longer phrases incorporating *air* (for example, *on the air*, *airs and graces*, *walk on air*) we are left with the strong impression that meaning is often conveyed not so much by single simple words but by multi-word items (of various types). That is to say (in other words!) units of meaning do not always, perhaps do not usually, correspond to single-word units such as *air*, *write*, or *part*.

Multiple meaning

We have noted that units of meaning are not always confined to simple words, and that, as a rule, the forms of these words do not reliably indicate their meanings. The situation is further complicated by the fact that not only can similar meanings be expressed by words of quite different form (for example, *start* and *begin*) but words of identical form can often express quite

different meanings. We are aware, too, that the meanings of words change to meet new needs, that the number of senses a lexical item may have varies considerably from one word to another, and that meanings constantly disappear, often because the objects and processes to which they refer have vanished or been replaced. As just one instance of the way existing words can be put to new uses, consider the items *server*, *crash*, *application*, *mouse*, and *document*, and the fresh meanings they have taken on in the field of computing. Or as an example of how words and their meanings can change in bewildering succession to reflect technical developments say, in sound recording and reproduction, note the following (partial) list: *gramophone record*, *long-playing record (LP)*, *single*, *extended-play record (EP)*, CD, *album*.

The name given to the existence of many meanings for a single word or phrase, and to the development of such meanings and their relatedness, is **polysemy**. The notion is often mentioned in the same breath as **homonymy** because traditionally much effort has been devoted to finding ways of distinguishing between them, both generally and in particular cases. When a given word (in the written language, a sequence of letters bounded on either side by a space) expresses two or more different but related meanings, we have polysemy. An example of a polysemous word is the verb *groom*, with its linked but separate senses:

(1) look after the coat of (a horse, dog, or other animal) by brushing and cleaning it;
(2) prepare or train (someone) for a particular purpose or activity.

If on the other hand the meanings are quite unrelated, as in the case of *light* ('not dark'), and *light* ('of little weight')—which incidentally are derived from different Old English words—we have homonymy: two separate vocabulary items which happen to share the same form.

Though polysemy and homonymy are often discussed together, the former is more widespread, and much more significant. Polysemy is typically the result of creativity and is crucial for the functioning of a language as an efficient signalling system. Imagine the loss of economy if every time we needed to convey

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