LANGUAGE AND MEANING
THE BIRTH AND GROWTH OF COGNITIVE SEMANTICS

Haifa University Press, 2006   Winner of Bahat prize

This book tells the story of the birth and growth of cognitive semantics. During the twentieth century, language became the focus of intensive inquiry. Philosophers, logicians, and mathematicians including Frege, Russell, and Wittgenstein, gradually shifted from the investigation of formal languages towards probing the nature of natural languages. This prompted the development of a new branch of philosophy, the philosophy of language. This shift is sometimes referred to as "the linguistic turn", and it coincided with the rapid expansion of research in computer science and in artificial intelligence.

Chomsky's revolutionary ideas about the universality of grammar and of language as reflecting the mind's structure and operations created a second turn called "the generative turn". Syntax was the core subject of this line of research as it was considered as a reflection of the mind's algorithm for acquiring and understanding language. Several decades would pass before questions about the place of meaning in these processes could be asked. The third turn "the cognitive turn", took place during the last quarter of the twentieth century. Meaning became a legitimate independent subject of research, and two related branches of linguistics flourished: semantics as the study of meaning, and pragmatics as the study of meaning in context. These are the subjects of the present study.

The book begins by introducing the early philosophical roots of concept analysis in Plato, Aristotle, and Kant, and then investigates the roots of semantics in Frege's philosophy of mathematics, in Russell's analysis of the structure of sentences, names, and descriptions, and in formal logic. Wittgenstein's thoughts about language inspired the development of two almost opposite lines of research. While the early Wittgenstein encouraged probing the referential and logical aspects of language, the late Wittgenstein played an important role in the development of theories of language use and language in context, hence advancing the study of pragmatics. Saussure's

structuralism was another source of influence for several developments in the search for meaning relations, semantic fields and semantic frames. The question of the universality of language, given the variety and versatility of human languages, was one of the central concerns in these studies.

The main part of the book is dedicated to the description of the emergence of cognitive semantics. Although inspired by Chomsky's generative agenda, the field developed independent research aims. The book describes the flourishing of ideas and research programs as well as debates and disagreements in the rapidly growing field of the study of the conceptual system. It reviews the varied approaches and methodologies of Jackendoff, Fillmore, Talmy, Langacker, and others on language and on the human conceptual system. It identifies the new tools they have developed for a better understanding of the meaning relations and the structure of the lexicon. The work done on metaphor by Lakoff and Johnson and their followers has brought cognitive semantics to a new stage as a legitimate branch of linguistics, with competing theories and methodologies necessarily resulting in debates and mutual enrichment. Another chapter of the book describes the fine line between lexical meaning and meaning in context i.e. between semantics and pragmatics. In the last two chapters, I revisit two subjects that I have dealt with in the past: abstract concept formation, and 'reconciliation' in decoding metaphors. I show how recent developments in semantic theory, along with current methodologies, shed new light on these issues.

Table of contents

1. From mathematics and logic to natural language
2. Language and the world
3. Meaning and truth
4. Meaning and formalization

D. Universals and the variety of languages -the story of color terms
1. How many color terms are there ?
2. Berlin and Kay's new order
3. Physics, biology and neurology of colors
4. Color terms -relativism vs. universalism
5. Relativism and scientific responsibility -the story of 'snow terms '

E. Language as a game
1. Wittgenstein's innovation
2. Definitions, categories and family resemblance
3. Meaning, use, and language games
4. Meaning, use, and language acquisition

F. In search of structure
1. Structural roots of semantics
2. Semantic fields
3. Semantic frames

III. Semantics and cognition

G. Approaches to the architecture of language
1. Morphosyntax
2. Morphosyntax and generativity
3. Meaning components

H. From experience to concepts
1. Metaphor in discourse, thought, and science
2. Percepts and concepts
3. Semantics in cognitive linguistics
4. Meaning, syntax, and cognition

I. Semantics and pragmatics
1. Meaning in context
2. Toward pragmatic meaning
3. Conceptual vs. procedural elements
4. Semantics and pragmatics -relations and boundaries

IV. Applications

J. In search of a conceptual infrastructure
1. Polysemy and semantic features .
2. Meaning relations and further order

K. Decoding metaphors
1. Semantic fields and discourse metaphors
2. The logic of metaphor
3. Metaphor and syntax
4. Deviance vs. compatibility
5. Abstraction and mechanisms of 'reconciliation '
6. Abstraction and the structure of language

V. Toward a unified theory of meaning