Review of Löbner, Sebastian 2002, *Understanding Semantics*. London: Arnold Publishers.

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One of the most important courses in the linguistics curriculum is an introduction to semantics for advanced undergraduate and/or beginning graduate students. The highly technical nature of this material, the intricacy of the theoretical issues involved, and the relevance for the students' further studies and future academic careers make it extremely desirable to have a good textbook for this course. There are a number of options for an introduction to formal semantics (Cann 1993, Chierchia and McConnel-Ginet 1990, de Swart 1998, Heim and Kratzer 1998) and at least one to mentalist semantics in the Cognitive Grammar framework (Ungerer and Schmidt 1996), and Cruse 1986 is the authoritative source on traditional lexical semantics viewed from a contemporary theoretical perspective. But many linguistics programs offer introductory semantics courses designed to cover major topics in lexical semantics and some amount of compositional semantics for students who may go on to specialize in either formal or mentalist approaches, or in studies of other fields in linguistics in which they have to be able to apply methods of mentalist or formalist semantics. Instructors looking for textbooks that give an up-to-date account of contemporary semantic theory suitable for such a course will most likely find themselves having to choose among Frawley (1992), Saeed (1997), and a recent addition, the book under review here. These three text books are comparable in many ways: they devote considerable attention to the differences among the major contemporary approaches to linguistic meaning; they attempt to give a fair introduction to the basic ideas of each of them; they give relatively more room to mentalist approaches and to topics in lexical semantics and the syntax-semantics interface, but do devote some attention to formal theories (although only Saeed and Löbner have an entire chapter dedicated to the basics of model theory) and compositional semantics (or sentence meaning) as well. All three books are also sensitive to crosslinguistic variation and the relativism/universalism issue (as it so happens, Frawley (1992) and Saeed (1997) are both written by scholars with field work experience). It is therefore convenient to begin this review with a comparison among the three textbooks mentioned.

Löbner's book stands out didactically. In keeping with the theme of Arnold's *Understanding Language* series, accessibility and conciseness of presentation are generally given priority over depth and breadth of discussion. The body of the text is kept to no more than 30 pages per chapter, accompanied by a short summary, a checklist of terms introduced in the chapter, a number of exercises, and recommendations for further reading. This is not to say that the exposition of theoretical problems is superficial. The author shows a remarkable

talent for condensing the discussion of complex and intricate issues to a few crisp and clear paragraphs. A good illustration of this is the discussion of possible world semantics and Montague's treatment of intensions in chapter 10. On just eleven pages, the author manages to provide students with some initial idea about the aims and limits of classical Montague Semantics – even Students who don't follow the at times still quite technical text in its entirety. Throughout the book, accessibility is further aided by frequent use of diagrams to illustrate the interplay of different factors determining linguistic meaning. Given the highly abstract nature of the subject matter, these diagrams represent a considerable achievement.

There are important differences in coverage. Löbner omits most of what is traditionally subsumed under the heading of pragmatics. There is only a paragraph on Gricean implicatures (p. 9); the treatment of presupposition is reduced to a footnote (pp. 209-210); although there are references to the problem of context dependence scattered throughout the book, there is no discussion of deixis or indexicality as such; speech acts are mentioned in the first two chapters, but not discussed either; and the reader will look in vain for any information on the role of "frame"-level (Fillmore 1982) or "script"-level (Schank & Abelson 1975) knowledge in linguistic semantics. There is an entire chapter (chapter 2) dedicated to the distinction between "descriptive, social, and expressive meaning", where "social meaning" seems to cover what is customarily known as social deixis and politeness, and "expressive meaning", a term probably coined after Buehler's (1934) *Ausdrucksfunktion* (the triad of descriptive, social, and expressive meaning seems to be inspired by Buehler's *organon* model, which is, however, not mentioned), refers to phenomena such as connotation and register choice, which convey indexical information about the speaker. But the main reason for mentioning social and expressive meaning seems to be to make the point that descriptive meaning – Fregean *Sinn* (sense) – does not exhaust utterance meaning, in the same breath restricting the scope of the remainder of the book to just this descriptive meaning (and its logical complement, Fregean *Bedeutung* (reference)). Divorcing the study of descriptive meaning from pragmatics may or may not be justified theoretically (most contemporary semanticists acknowledge that any analysis of descriptive meaning presupposes at the very least indexical resolution); but it has obvious didactic disadvantages. The proper analysis of descriptive meaning presupposes the identification of pragmatically generated meaning components, and Löbner's book fails to provide the tools for doing that. Besides, many linguistics programs cannot provide introductions to pragmatics with the same regularity with which they offer semantics courses. And students may walk away from a course based on Löbner's book never having come to appreciate the proper place of descriptive meaning in the larger interactional picture, and thus considering semantics a discipline that takes a rather artificial view of linguistic meaning and is poorly equipped to handle actual discourse data.

There are other respects in which the scope of the textbook under review is more limited than that of its closest competitors. Thus, it offers no treatment of the semantics of "functional categories" such as tense, aspect, and modality. This move, too, may be justified theoretically – functional categories are properly dealt with as part of compositional semantics, and a comprehensive introduction of compositional semantics is outside the scope of the course envisioned by Löbner, Frawley, or Saeed. But Frawley and Saeed, unlike Löbner, decide to compromise here and offer *some*, however informal, discussion of the meanings conveyed by the operators in question, perhaps assuming that many students will not take more advanced courses in semantics, but will nevertheless require some knowledge of the semantics of functional categories, for instance when conducting descriptive work in the field or theoretical and/or typological work in syntax or morphology.

There is no single linguistic or philosophical theory that lays the foundations of the entire gamut of studies commonly subsumed under the heading of linguistic semantics. Consequently, every textbook on semantics has to be somewhat idiosyncratic in how it weaves the various threads of inquiry it presents into a more or less coherent fabric. One idiosyncrasy of Löbner's book has already been mentioned – the postulate of social and expressive meaning alongside descriptive meaning. What makes this idiosyncratic is, above all, the failure to place the phenomena in question in the context of other sources of utterance meaning, which have attracted more attention among semanticists in recent decades, such as indexicality, implicature, presupposition, and speech acts. But the aim of the chapter – to distinguish descriptive and non-descriptive meaning without having to discuss the latter at length – is accomplished quite efficiently.

Another unique trait of this book is found in chapter 6, titled "Predication". This effectively introduces the analysis of the semantic contributions of content words to sentence meaning in predicate logic – without a proper introduction to predicate logic, which is deferred to chapter 10 – thereby offering a very elementary treatment of compositionality. *En passant*, Löbner manages to discuss argument structure, thematic relations, linking, selection restrictions, and semantic anomaly (termed "semantic irregularity") – all on a mere 20 pages! There is no better example to illustrate the design differences between the book under review and Frawley's and Saeed's textbooks. The extent of the discussion in particular of thematic relations and linking theory is only a fraction of what Frawley and Saeed provide; but at the same time, this reviewer is not aware of a more concise and coherent informal introduction to meaning composition than Löbner's. It should be mentioned, though, that Löbner's text conveys the impression that any treatment of compositionality necessarily relies on predicate logic, ignoring the arguments advanced by some scholars in the mentalist camp (e.g., Jackendoff 1983, 2002) to the effect that predicate logic is neither the only nor in some ways even an optimal format for the compositional analysis of sentence meaning.

A final innovation worth mentioning here is presented in the discussion of prototype theory in chapter 9. Löbner critiques a version of prototype semantics that was in the public domain, as it were, in the 1970s and 80s, although it has hardly ever been explicitly advocated. According to this version, for any cognitive category to have a prototype means that membership in that category is "fuzzy", determined by similarity to the prototype. Löbner points out the evidence (well-known since Osherson and Smith 1981) against this view and proposes an alternative account which views prototypicality and fuzziness as independent phenomena (although Löbner fails to mention that similar proposals have been advanced in greater detail by Jackendoff (1983, 2002) and Lakoff (1987)). But Löbner then goes on to argue that graded category membership as such is incompatible with the structure of natural languages, referring to the universal polarity of propositional expressions, or the ability to negate propositions (even in non-declarative speech acts), a phenomenon Löbner calls "polarization":

> "Polarization is inescapable, but it would not be, and probably would not even exist, if membership in semantic categories were graded. It is therefore concluded that semantic categories are binary." (p. 194)

Polarization is imposed on vague or fuzzy expressions through contextual fixing of standards:

> "Thus, semantic concepts may be vague in the sense that the boundaries of the resulting categories can be fixed in a flexible way, but in each given context they must be fixed somehow and will then yield a simple yes-or-no categorization." (p. 195)

Does Löbner mean to suggest that humans are incapable of entertaining the thought of a proposition which is neither entirely true nor entirely false? To me that thought appears quite inconspicuous. If you ask me whether the Munsell chip G34 as per the coding schema of Berlin and Kay 1969 is blue, I will be more likely to say *No* than to say *Yes*; but a more appropriate answer than either of these would be something like *Well, it's a deep purple, which is midway between dark blue and dark red; so it's not really blue, but it's not completely not blue either*. For suggestions on how to formalize the logic of such graded or partially determinate propositions, cf. Kamp and Partee 1995, Kay and McDaniel 1978, and Zadeh 1965, *inter alia*. Furthermore, when Löbner appears to imply that the alleged cognitive difficulty of dealing with partially determinate propositions is somehow a consequence of the structure of language, I simply fail to follow this.

Understanding semantics is an original and innovative resource for introductory courses on linguistic semantics, excelling in particular in conciseness and accessibility of presentation. These fortes come at the expense of

considerable limitations in coverage, which are a function of the style of the series in which the book appears.

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