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The first dictionary dedicated to semantics

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The first dictionary dedicated to semantics

M. Lynne Murphy, Anu Koskela. 2010. *Key Terms in Semantics*. London/New York: Continuum.

Lynne Murphy and Anu Koskela (both from the University of Sussex) have produced what could possibly be considered as the first dictionary dedicated to semantics, at least in the English language.¹ This awaited reference book is organized like an A-Z dictionary of core concepts related to semantics (pp. 7-176), which composes the bulk of this volume, completed by a presentation of nineteen important figures (“Key thinkers”) in semantics such as Noam Chomsky, Willard Van Orman Quine, Bertrand Russell, Ferdinand de Saussure and other, lesser-known academics in this field like Rudolf Carnap, Saul Kripke or Anne Wierzbicka (pp. 177-219). While there is no “dictionary of semantics” as such existing in the English language at this moment, this unique and innovative book will be most helpful for advanced undergraduates (and for most scholars) in the disciplines of semantics, linguistics, and their related fields.

Even though there is no definition of semantics in the A-Z section and no entry for this term, Lynne Murphy and Anu Koskela explain in their detailed Introduction their focus on linguistic semantics, understood here as a branch within linguistics that “approaches the meaning of linguistic expressions with reference to the structures of language that either reveal (or possibly) constrain the range of possible linguistic meanings and the architecture through which meaning is constructed or represented” (p. 2). However, the authors also acknowledge the fact there are other disciplinary approaches related to the understanding of signs, such as “pragmatics, semiotics, and grammatical theory” (p. 3).

These Key terms in semantics have much to offer in an impressive diversity of entries organized alphabetically, from “Absolute” and “Abstract” (p. 7) up to “Word” and “Zeugma”, the latter being equivalent to “syllepsis” and defined as “a linguistic construction where a single constituent is related to two different semantic interpretations” (p. 176). Usually, each entry covers about half a page, with some notable exceptions for more important or more

¹ Twenty years ago, there was in China a Concise Dictionary of semantics (by Ben She Yi Ming, Shandong People's Publishing House, 1993).

complex key terms. Of course, the basic terms (like adjective, noun, number, and verb) are included as well.

Considering the privileged topics common to most readers of these pages, one should begin by looking firstly at the page dedicated to “pragmatics”, which are “defined as the study of language use, how language interacts with context”, adding that “the domain of pragmatics is generally viewed as excluding those aspects of meaning that fall into the realm of semantics” (p. 124). This one-page entry ranks among the most interesting, accurate, and detailed in this book; it includes a distinction in five points between semantics and pragmatics, a brief presentation of “central issues for pragmatics”, and some ongoing topics, completed by a few bibliographical references.

Among various entries (probably more than 200), there is an unusual one on “Definition”, which “in semantics and lexicography is typically expected to include only as much information as is necessary to explain of the word or phrase and exclude irrelevant information” (p. 53). Elsewhere, one finds as well an entry on “concept”, presented as “mental representations of knowledge about categories of entities and experiences”, adding that “the concept allows us to identify and categorize things in the world (...)” (p. 37). Further on, the term “context” is seen as “the background against which the meaning of an utterance is interpreted” (p. 46). A longer discussion and an appropriate articulation of the concept follow. Among too many interesting topics, one finds elsewhere a definition of “Holism”, which is opposed to atomism and presented as the “position that meanings are not composed of semantic components — that is, that any subparts that may be discerned in a meaning cannot exist without reference to the whole meaning or to the arrangements of meanings in a semantic network” (p. 78).

Such dictionaries and most “key terms books” produced by major publishers (SAGE, Routledge) are undoubtedly valuable because they provide detailed definitions and multiple articulations of core concepts that need to be discussed and not just defined in a few words in order to get a full spectrum of their significations and implications.

Perhaps one would have liked to find more entries, for example one specific entry on “ideologies”, “interaction” or “symbols” (unfortunately, these three “missing” terms do not even appear in the index). Such encyclopedic works are often like an invitation to jump randomly from one concept to another. Likewise, a specific entry on “theory” would have been useful; we only find here an entry on “theory theory”, according to which “concepts are defined against a conceptual base of non-expert, folk theories” (p. 164). Other theoretical

considerations reappear here and there (see for example the entry on “Conceptual Metaphor Theory”, p. 38, or the entry on “Discourse Representation Theory”, p. 58).

Since academics and book critics are always asking for more whenever they review a comprehensive dictionary or any reference book such as this one, I do have a few (minor) quibbles about this book. Obviously, a single entry on semantics (plus some other variants such as linguistic semantics) should have been included in the A-Z section; it is briefly discussed here in the prefatorily pages. At the end of the book, instead of providing just a listing, the bibliography of “Key texts in Semantics” should have included a few comments explaining why each book is relevant in this field (pp. 221-233). Nevertheless, these impressive Key terms in semantics are instructive and written by passionate experts; obviously, Lynne Murphy and Anu Koskela should be congratulated for their initiative. Like an invitation to this discipline, these Key terms in semantics will be very useful for students in linguistics, pragmatics, and philosophy, and although it might be too dense for the college level, this book should be part of every university library. Maybe potential buyers should check a few pages before buying, just to see whether they feel comfortable with the level of deepening, complexity, and clarity brought into this book. Perhaps some younger readers would prefer a simpler text or a more general reference tool either in philosophy or linguistics, although there are not many reference books available now (at least in English) on this particular field.

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Research Interests: American Studies, Canadian Studies, Quebec Studies, Cultural Studies,
Gender Studies, Environmental Studies, Social Theories

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