

The Language of Word Meaning

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1 Introduction

FEDERICA BUSA AND PIERRETTE BOUILLON

Lexical semantics has not yet given a satisfactory answer to a crucial question that implicitly or explicitly has been asked by philosophers of language, computer scientists, linguists, and lexicographers, namely, “What is word meaning?” The goal of this part of the volume is to set the stage for subsequent discussion, presenting the issues that confront those investigating language and the mind through the study of the mental lexicon.

The reader should not expect a definite answer. We may gain an insight that word meaning can best be studied as a transparent structure, rather than a black box whose contents escape us. Alternatively, we may choose to take a stand in the debate presented in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, where opposed views are expressed.

There are two broad positions emerging in this part of the volume: One argues for an internal syntax of word meaning (James McGilvray; James Pustejovsky; Yorick Wilks), and the other views concepts as particulars (Jerry Fodor and Ernie Lepore).

McGilvray discusses how word meaning contributes to the creative aspect of language and reaches the conclusion that lexical semantics, as done within a research program such as the Generative Lexicon, is a “branch of syntax, broadly speaking.”

Jerry Fodor and Ernie Lepore criticize lexical semantics frameworks that aim at isolating the internal constitution of word meaning. They forcefully argue against the assumption that the content of concepts is constituted by inferential relations, a view that necessarily leads to holism. Alternatively, they take concepts to be atoms with no internal constitution whatsoever, such that all that can be said about word meaning is: “Nothing can be said about word meaning.”

In replying to Fodor and Lepore, Pustejovsky presents an internalist view of the lexicon, where qualia structure is the syntax for lexical description, which in turn provides the input to the rules of semantic composition. The role of a syntax of word meaning is precisely that of avoiding holism, while permitting questions concerning the well-formedness of concepts, the combinatorial possibilities of the elements constituting their internal structure (i.e., qualia), and the relations they bear to each other.

Yorick Wilks, approaching the debate from the Artificial Intelligence (AI) perspective, argues against the position of Fodor and Lepore. In this area of

research, the semantic import of words ought to be explicitly spelled out if any degree of understanding is to be achieved. In particular, Wilks addresses explicitly the role of inferential relations as key elements that drive “intelligent” natural language understanding and the computational modeling of language. Such a view could be challenged by arguing that the requirements from AI may not mean anything from the perspective of human psychology. The human mind may not be computational in this sense and hence the effort is moot.

Before taking this position – which in our opinion is an unfair criticism – there are still too many avenues of research to be explored. These are addressed in later parts of the volume and include seeking a sound methodology in lexical semantics; addressing the *poverty of the stimulus*, and the ease with which people *prefer* (as opposed to select) certain interpretations and not others in different contexts. These issues are so much at the core of lexical research that their answer determines whether there is a field of investigation at all or whether there should only be lexicographic practice. This is certainly a potential alternative. However, as shown in the last part of the volume, there may not be options after all. Lexicographic practice, in fact, may have some surprises in store for us.