Book review / Рецензия

Review of Mel'čuk, Igor & Milićević, Jasmina. 2020
An Advanced Introduction to Semantics.
A Meaning-Text Approach.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Svetlana IVANOVA ⬛✉

Pushkin Leningrad State University, St. Petersburg, Russia
✉s.ivanova@lengu.ru

Рецензия на книгу
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С.В. ИВАНОВА ⬛✉

Ленинградский государственный университет имени А.С. Пушкина,
Санкт-Петербург, Россия
✉s.ivanova@lengu.ru

This review is a certain digression from what a typical review for a journal is supposed to be. The laws of the genre are violated for a number of reasons. No doubt this review has a personal touch, as the name of Igor Mel'čuk cannot help

evoking a storm of memories and associations for those who started or did their research back in the 70-s and early 80-s. And that is the generation I belong to. That's why the book under review is not only a book for me, it is not only about linguistics, even though it is a great contribution to it – it is part of history for me as a member of the research community in Russia whose life in linguistics started in the early and mid-80s. In fact, this review could have been entitled "Forty years later". About forty years ago my Ph.D. course started at the Maurice Thorez Institute of Foreign Languages in Moscow. We, Ph.D. students from different parts of the Soviet Union, wrote our theses. We worked in the libraries, talked to each other and shared our findings not only in the classrooms of the well-known school of foreign languages but also in the kitchen in the dorms in Usachevka – a great place where future researchers were bred. Among this shared knowledge transferred by word of mouth in the kitchen (a symbolic place for those who lived back then) was the name of Igor Mel'čuk whispered with amazement and awe. We all knew his name, we avidly read his articles in the Problems of Structural Linguistics (Мельчук 1968, 1972) series but could not refer to them in our reference lists, it was one of the conventions, an unwritten rule we all knew and had to abide to. We read his books and articles (mostly articles) though, we admired him, we all respected his stance as a researcher. Since then, Igor Mel'čuk has delighted his followers with numerous books, and I cannot help mentioning some of the latest publications (Mel'čuk 2018, 2021). Now about forty years later, yours truly, inspired and humbled, is writing a review of the book by one of the Mohicans of linguistics. Holding this book, I again feel as a Ph.D. student in Moscow who is privileged to do this job and overwhelmed with responsibility.

Natural language semantics has been a great challenge for linguistics since day one. After all, what is there in language that makes it a salient means of communication? It is meaning. That puts semantics in the limelight of linguistic studies and makes it one of the greatest challenging objects for linguists to describe. Various schools in linguistics approach it from different angles, which results in a diversity of answers. Igor Mel'čuk and Jasmina Milićević offer their take on semantics which draws upon and incorporates achievements of numerous schools of linguistic thought but, first and foremost, it fits in the Meaning-Text Theory. The authors start with fundamentals (Part I), concentrate on meaning in language and its description (Part II), and then discuss Meaning-Text model of semantics (Part III).

In Fundamentals (Part I) the authors paint a general picture to show the correlation between language as a bigger entity and semantics as one of its components. Then the layout of the book displays the logic of zooming in on lexical semantics which afterwards is followed with the part about meaning in the framework of the text. Nevertheless, in the preliminary notes (p. xix) the authors give a fair warning that the book cannot and, I would say, should not be read linearly as language itself is not a linear structure, everything in it is interwoven and interconnected. In fact, this is a great advantage of the book since you can go to

whatever section you are interested in and try to fathom those acute questions which need answering.

First of all, the authors differentiate between two meanings of the term 'semantics'. On the one hand, semantics is a component of language and, on the other, it is a branch of linguistics. Semantics in this latter meaning is a relatively new discipline. It is located on the crossroads of linguistics and some other spheres of research like cognitive science, psychology, artificial intelligence and so on that have vested interest in semantics, as linguistic meaning is not only the pivot of language structure but also a mysteriously elusive product of communication that could be approached and described from different perspectives for its enigmatic nature to be disclosed.

After giving some general remarks on the nature of semantics as a branch of linguistics, the authors switch over to the object of their studies which is semantics as a component of language, the prime of linguistic description. Since semantics is integrated into the system of language as a component, it could be described along the same lines as the bigger entity. Language as this bigger entity is understood as "a set of rules encoded in the brains of its speakers that establish a correspondence between meanings of language and their expression, or texts of language" (p. 4). Meanings are expressed by texts and in texts and thus could be extracted from them. Obviously, meanings and texts are linked together by means of rules which "constitute language proper" (p. 11). Consequently, linguistic meaning is a formal description (p. 71) and it operates as "shallow" meaning ('non-pragmatic, non-extralinguistic, non-encyclopedic meaning') opposite to "deep" meaning which is accessible through life and situational experience (encyclopedic together with pragmatic knowledge and referential identification) as well as logical capacities (p. 73–74). There are three aspects of linguistic meaning: propositional, communicative and rhetorical (p. 76). Propositional meaning is "the meaning that targets the state of affairs described by this expression – that is, entities and facts in the world, as well as the relations between them, including the Speaker's interior states, such as his thoughts, attitudes, desires, etc." (p. 76). Communicative meaning is tied to the Speaker's intentions whereas rhetorical meaning has to do with the Speaker's stylistic preferences and intentions (p. 77).

After putting linguistic meaning in relation to language as a system of formal rules, the authors define the former. Linguistic meaning is a complex entity which "is described in terms of discrete semantic units – semantemes and semantic dependency relations between them" (p. 79). A semanteme is interpreted as "a lexical meaning – that is, the signified of a full lexical unit of language" (p. 79) and characterized by structural complexity. The authors introduce a whole set of notions that make up semantic metalanguage and perform the role of instruments of linguistic description of linguistic meaning, including semanteme, arguments, semantic actants, semantic dependency.

Semantemes are represented by two major classes, those of semantic predicates and semantic names. If semantic predicates are an "incomplete," or "binding,"

meanings (when used by the Speaker, they require that some other meanings, called its arguments, be expressed alongside it) (p. 83), "a semantic name is a complete and non-binding meaning; it cannot have arguments" (p. 85). The term semantic dependency is introduced to show how the semantic predicate is related to semantic actants or arguments. These two types of semantemes are the basic instruments of semantic decomposition which is necessary not only for defining words per se but also will be further used to describe the propositional meaning. Thus, homogeneity of semantic representations on different levels of the language system is ensured. The notion of semantic decomposition is crucial for this approach as it reveals the hierarchical structure of linguistic meaning which "is composed of clearly identifiable units" (p. 89). It also makes it possible to represent the internal structure of linguistic meaning on any level of language structure. This is a particularly important tenet of the authors' conception as the authors show further how it all works in lexicography and in the text and how text semantics can be formalized for machine translation, for one.

If Part I addresses fundamental problems of semantics, Part II deals with lexical meaning and the application of lexical meaning description in lexicography. As the authors state, lexicography cuts through all branches of linguistics as it studies words from all angles. Since the authors maintain that semantics may be formalized, they posit what a lexicographic definition should be. This definition includes formal description of meaning. Lexicographic practice embraces all kinds of units: lexical units (lexemes and idioms), collocations, and cliches. Besides, the authors introduce another opposition which could be of use in meaning description: lexeme *vs* phraseme which is "a phrase consisting of at least two lexemes that is paradigmatically constrained" (p. 105). If collocations and cliches as examples of phrasemes are well-known, it is of interest to get familiar with nominemes (p. 111) and pragmatemes (p. 112).

The formalization of the meaning concerns connotation as well. The authors understand connotation as "a semantic characteristic which, in language L, is attributed to the entities denoted by l(exeme) but which does not constitute a part of its meaning and, consequently, is not a component of l(exeme)'s lexicographic definition" (p. 135). Though the authors believe in linguistic intuition, they maintain that (1) connotations should be supported by linguistic evidence, (2) they cannot be part of the lexicographic definition of the lexeme and (3) they can be indicated in the semantic zone of the dictionary entry, under a special heading "Connotation". The authors also dwell upon lexical relations (synonymy, antonymy, polysemy, conversion) and lexical functions. Both chapters are a vivid illustration how the idea of formalization may be applied in semantics.

Part III puts the problem under consideration into the perspective of the 'Meaning-Text' theory. In the long run, the description of linguistic meaning is necessitated by the fact that words do not exist separately. Lexical semantics is revealed in sentences, that's why the 'Meaning-Text' theory is essential for the

application of the formal procedures. Semantic networks as an embodiment of formalism are used to reveal the propositional meaning of lexical units and that of utterances, in particular, sentences (p. 255). The sentential meaning, the authors argue, is established by means of indicating dependency relations. "Deep-syntactic relations are "generalized" syntactic relations, each subsuming several concrete surface-syntactic relations" (p. 294). The three fundamental distinctions in syntax, according to the authors, are: coordination ~ subordination; weak subordination ~ strong subordination; modification ~ actancy (p. 295). According to this theory, linguistic knowledge is represented as a huge inventory of correspondences between thought and speech, and semantics is viewed "as a component, or module, of the linguistic system, whose functioning is simulated by a corresponding linguistic model" (p. xvii). Within this approach, semantics is viewed formally and gets its formal representation in the system of rigorous notions, specified by about eighty mathematical-like definitions. The sentential meaning is presented as semantic representation which is an aggregate embracing semantic structure, the semantic-communicative structure, the rhetorical structure, and the referential structure (p. 257). All of them are represented as networks with nodes or tree diagrams.

All in all, when it comes to analysis, language boils down to form and meaning as a linguistic sign unites the plane of content and the plane of expression, the signified and the signifier. Thus, according to the authors' stance, semantics is inseparable from formal representation. The third constant used to describe semantics is function as that's what the unity of form and meaning is employed for. The authors are consistent in their approach and use these three constants of linguistic description to reveal semantics as the "crucial component of human language" (p. i). Semantics is represented as a system of rigorous rules and notions with an emphasis on formal modelling (p. xvii).

As a reviewer I can add that the view on semantics presented in the book by Igor Mel'čuk and Jasmina Milićević ties together many a thread woven into the fabric of present-day linguistic theory. The authors put together the legacy of well-known linguistic schools to the advantage of the approach they present. For example, the Saussurean postulate that language is a system of systems is reflected in the idea that the Text-Meaning model at large works on all levels of language: semantic, syntactic, morphological, phonological (p. 13–14). The idea that semantics consists of a lexicon and grammar (p. 18) relates to M.A.K. Halliday's idea about lexicogrammar which was suggested by him within functional linguistics and afterwards this approach was considered as one of the major principles in cognitive linguistics. The understanding of language as a structure goes back to Ferdinand de Saussure as well as to American structuralists according to who language can be presented formally. When we read that "the lexical stock is a psychological and neurological reality, namely, particular information stored in the brains of speakers" (p. 99), we cannot but remember Bloomfieldian linguistics. The

claim that "every language presents a unique conceptualization of the world; this phenomenon is often referred to as specific articulation of extralinguistic reality, which is "built into" a language and which it imposes on its speakers" (p. 81) is in line with Humboldt's lingua-philosophical heritage, or Potebnya's 'close' and 'distant' meanings. Obviously, the statement that "languages differ widely in the quantity of information that they can "squeeze" into their semantemes" (p. 81) corresponds to the tenets of modern cultural linguistics. Moreover "semanteme packaging" is different in different languages which can be exemplified with verbs of motion in English in contrast to Russian or Spanish. Semantic decomposition which presupposes that complex meanings may be represented with simpler meanings (using cause verbs and such) is the development of the ideas of generative semantics. The way lexical meaning is described and the range of instruments used for this type of analysis shows close ties with Russian school of semantics. There is a certain correlation of Meaning-Text theory with Anna Wierzbicka's Natural Semantic Metalanguage with a certain digression outlined by the authors: "Whereas for us semantic primitives represent a goal, for Wierzbicka they are a starting point: she posits several dozens of universal primitive meanings called semantic primes (such that they have lexical – or at least morphological – expressions in all the languages of the world) and uses them to describe all lexical and grammatical meanings in all languages" (p. 92). Another theory that is close to the authors' understanding of how semantic components function is the theory of semantic roles elaborated by Charles Fillmore: semantic roles are associated with semantic actants (p. 96). The authors' stance was influenced by the generative grammar tradition (Noam Chomsky's deep and surface structures) and Roman Jacobson's ideas (texts are explained in Roman Jacobson's terms as "something immediately perceptible", whereas linguistic meaning is "something conceivable and translatable").

To sum up, the book by Igor Mel'čuk and Jasmina Milićević is undoubtedly a great read for students of linguistics and linguists at large, especially researchers working in the field of linguistic semantics, machine translation, lexicography, language learning and teaching, to name just a few. This book is another good reason to delve into Mel'čuk's ideas, reflect on them and admire the parsimonious and elegant ways a true researcher can approach one of the most mysterious and challenging objects of linguistic description. Bravo, Igor Alexandrovich! Encore!

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Bionote:
Svetlana IVANOVA is Dr Habil. in Philology, Professor, Head of the Department of Romance and Germanic Philology and Linguodidactics of Pushkin Leningrad State University. Her research interests include text linguistics, English grammar, discourse analysis, and media linguistics.
e-mail: s.ivanova@lengu.ru
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0127-9934

Сведения об авторе:
Светлана Викторовна ИВАНОВА – доктор филологических наук, профессор, заведующий кафедрой романо-германской филологии и лингводидактики, Ленинградский государственный университет имени А.С. Пушкина. Сфера ее научных интересов: лингвистика текста, английская грамматика, дискурс-анализ, медиа-лингвистика.
e-mail: s.ivanova@lengu.ru
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0127-9934