

A Monumental Piece of Scholarship

John Lyons

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Semantics, Vol. 2. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1977.
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John Lyons is Professor of Linguistics at the University of Sussex, England. He was previously Professor at the University of Edinburgh and Lecturer at Cambridge University, where he earned his PhD. Lyons is Chairman of the British National Committee for Linguistics. His other books include Structural Semantics, Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics, New Horizons in Linguistics, and Noam Chomsky.

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UNTIL very recently, there has been available no really satisfactory introduction to the semantics of natural languages, especially one that could be used by someone with little or no linguistic or philosophical background to obtain a working familiarity with the major problems of the discipline or with the major approaches to the solutions of those problems. Now suddenly there are several. Two of these books, Janet Fodor's *Semantics* (1976) and Ruth Kempson's *Semantic Theory* (1977),

concern themselves primarily with the nature of the semantic component of a generative grammar of a language. Lyons's two volumes, on the other hand, are "intended to be as neutral as possible with respect to alternative theories of grammar" (p. 74). To the extent that they deal with "theoretical linguistic semantics," they provide not a "construction of a general theory of meaning for language," but rather a "theoretical discussion of various aspects of meaning in language" (p. 138).

As Lyons points out, each volume is relatively self-contained. The first is quite general; seven chapters are devoted to the setting of semantics "within the more general framework of semiotics" (p. xi), and two chapters are devoted to the investigation of structural lexicography. The second specifically deals with linguistic semantics; three chapters are devoted to the study of the relation of semantics to grammar, and five chapters to specific topics in linguistic semantics, including the nature of the lexicon, stylistic variation, deixis, temporal reference, speech acts, and modality. Before we turn to a consideration of the content of these books, a few words about their organization are in order.

These books are clearly designed to be used. Approximately 700 technical terms are introduced and defined. Each time that such a term is introduced, it is accompanied by an asterisk (and sometimes also when the term appears later on, to remind the reader that it is a technical one), and the page number on

The great drawback of new books is that they prevent our reading the old ones.

—JOSEPH JOUBERT

which the term is first introduced is given in boldface type in one of the subject indices (each book has its own index).

Lyons's treatment of semiotics includes the mathematical theory of communication, kinesics, the "design features of language," the origin of language, Peirce's theory of signs, the communication systems of primates, behaviorist theories of meaning, logical semantics (including outlines of propositional and predicate calculus and the logic of classes), and theories of reference, sense, and denotation. His discussions are systematic, thorough, and well balanced; his conclusions concerning the vexed question whether the difference between human and primate communication systems is one of degree or of kind are typical. He notes that it is important to clarify first what is meant by *language* before it can be decided whether language is or is not unique to the human species (p. 93). He adds that even if we should conclude that language is unique to human beings, we should not lose sight of the fact that "there is much in the everyday use of language that links it with other kinds of signalling behavior in both men and animals" (p. 94).

Lyons is perhaps best known for his work in structural lexicography; thus, it is not surprising that his two chapters on the subject, one on semantic fields and the other on sense relations among words (including, but not limited to, what is known as *componential analysis*), are particularly outstanding. The discussion on semantic fields is prefaced with an excellent summary of Saussurean structuralism, and continues with a critical analysis of the work of the two most influential field theorists, Trier and Porzig. The chapter on sense relations is a revision of chapter 10 of Lyons's *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics* (1968). It is especially useful for its discussion of such unsolved problems as the analysis of the expression of part-whole relations.

IN keeping with his stated aims, Lyons does not develop a general theory of the relation of semantics to grammar. However, in recognition of the importance

of the recent development of generative theories of grammar, he does attempt to relate his discussion of semantic properties of linguistic expression to well-known theories of generative grammar. He points out, for example, that such classic examples of so-called transformational ambiguity as *Flying planes can be dangerous* are also ambiguous lexically, and hence cannot be used to demonstrate that transformations are absolutely necessary for providing an account of grammatical ambiguity. He also analyzes at some length the problem of accounting for the semantic properties of morphologically complex words within generative grammar. The specific suggestions that he makes regarding the solution to this problem are, in my opinion, among the best that have been proposed so far (see especially sections 13.2 and 13.3, pp. 521-550).

Because Lyons does not adopt any particular theory of the relation between syntax and semantics, a number of his analyses may require reformulation, depending on what theory the reader may happen to favor. For example, in his discussion of elementary sentence types, he draws a distinction between *equative* sentences, which he analyzes as of the form NP (+ Cop) + NP, and *ascriptive* sentences, which he analyzes as of the form NP (+ Cop) + N/A (where NP = *noun phrase*, Cop = *copula*, N/A indicates the choice between *noun* and *adjective* and the parentheses indicate that the enclosed material may be missing in some languages). Granted that there are important syntactic and semantic differences between equative and ascriptive sentence types, Lyons's formulaic representations of them are objectionable. As Lyons himself points out, some English sentences (e.g., *John is the author of this book*) are grammatically

ambiguous in terms of the distinction between equative and ascriptive sentences. When such a sentence is viewed as an equative sentence, the postcopula phrase is analyzed as a noun phrase. However, when it is viewed as an ascriptive sentence, the same phrase is analyzed as a noun, with the definite article *the* having to be supplied by a semantically neutral insertion rule (which also assigns to the postcopula string the derived structure of a noun phrase). In most carefully worked-out generative syntactic theories, such a rule could not be formulated, and practitioners of such theories would have to reject Lyons's analysis in favor of one that treats the ambiguity as arising from the lexical ambiguity of the copula. This alternative analysis, of course, runs into difficulty when it is applied to languages that make the equative/ascriptive distinction, but that lack a copula. To express the distinction, one would have to say that such languages have a lexically ambiguous but morphologically null copula. However, such a solution, while admittedly inelegant, is not nearly so implausible on general theoretical grounds as Lyons's claim that English has a semantically neutral rule that converts certain nouns into noun phrases by the addition of a definite or indefinite article.

THERE are other difficulties as well in reconciling Lyons's generally perceptive semantic analyses with a suitably restrictive syntactic analysis. However, these difficulties should not prevent anyone from enjoying and profiting from Lyons's work. It is a monumental piece of scholarship and one that is a pleasure to be able to recommend to a wide readership.

Professional jargon is unpleasant. Translating it into English is a bore. I narrowly outlawed the word "unique." Practically every press release contains it. Practically nothing ever is.

—FRED HECHINGER
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