Review of *Meaning: A slim guide to semantics*, by Paul Elbourne

Christopher Pinon

Université de Lille, CNRS STL

christopher.pinon@univ-lille.fr

Paul Elbourne's "slim guide to semantics" covers an impressive range of topics in the field of natural language semantics over the course of eight chapters plus a conclusion, totalling 174 small pages. His guide is not a conventional textbook on semantics: for example, there are no exercises, and the use of formalism is kept to a minimum. Although not stated explicitly, his guide appears to be largely aimed at linguists who are not necessarily semanticists, as well as at philosophers and psychologists who are interested in semantics from the perspective of linguistics. Elbourne's prose is smooth and conversational, and he comes across as a seasoned narrator who is telling us the great story of semantics.

Elbourne starts out in chapter 1 by addressing the question of definitions, more precisely, the question of whether it is possible to define what words mean. For educated laypeople, definitions of words' meanings are most probably what they associate with semantics, given people's familiarity with (monolingual) dictionaries. Elbourne discusses various examples of words together with their proposed definitions (including, in some cases, technical definitions), and he offers a prolonged reflection on whether it is possible to define the meaning of the everyday word *chair*, looking to the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s definition of *chair* for possible help. His conclusion is that aside from technical terms in mathematics, proposed definitions of words, as useful and instructive as they are, ultimately fail to be satisfactory. I suspect that his statement "I hope to have convinced you that dictionary entries do not generally give the meanings of words" (p. 12) may come as surprise or let-down to readers who imagined that semantics would offer something valuable to contribute to the practical problem of defining words.

In chapter 2, entitled "What are word meanings?", Elbourne contrasts the two dominant approaches to word meanings, the *referential theory of meaning* and the *internalist theory of meaning*. According to the referential theory of meaning, meanings of words are "things in the world", hence public, which contrasts with the internalist theory of meaning, which holds that word meanings are concepts in our heads, hence private. If we take the word *France* as an example, the meaning of *France* according to the referential theory of meaning is a certain hexagon-shaped region in Western Europe bordering on the Atlantic Ocean (its meaning is that very region), whereas its meaning according to the internalist theory of meaning is a concept that we have of France. Elbourne skilfully reviews the advantages and disadvantages of each theory, introducing notions such as property, abstract object, Russellian

proposition, prototype, and compositionality along the way. Although his sympathies lie with the internalist theory of meaning, he leaves the debate between the two theories open.

In chapter 3 Elbourne turns to semantic properties of words, which include synonymy, ambiguity, vagueness, polysemy, and homonymy. These are notions that would be addressed in most courses on descriptive semantics. He points out two uses of *vague*, one which is common in linguistics and is illustrated by the word *horse*, whose meaning does not decide between a racehorse, a carthorse, or a charger, and another use which is common in philosophy and is exemplified by the word *bald*, whose meaning gives rise to borderline cases (how many hairs still count as 'bald'?). He discusses the tricky issue of how to distinguish polysemy from homonymy (is polysemy not ultimately just a case of homonymy?), citing an experiment on brain imaging that supports the view that polysemy is encoded differently from homonymy in the brain. This result leads Elbourne to return briefly to the topic of chapter 2 and to suggest that the internalist theory of meaning may be more parsimonious in the sense of Ockham's Razor than the referential theory of meaning, because it appears that mental representations of word meanings are needed anyway.

Chapter 4, entitled "What are sentence meanings?", is about how the referential and internalist theories of meaning conceive of sentence meanings. Unlike chapter 2 on word meanings, which was equally divided between the referential and internalist theories of meaning, in this chapter nearly all of Elbourne's discussion is devoted to the referential theory of meaning. In the internalist theory of meaning, sentence meanings are "internal mental structures" that are somehow arrived at compositionally from the meanings of the words and how they are combined syntactically, but beyond this general statement, it is difficult to provide the details because they have not yet been worked out. In contrast, the referential theory of meaning offers an elaborate picture of how sentence meanings are derived. In the referential theory of meaning, an influential view on sentence meanings is that they are sets of possible worlds (alternatively, sets of possible situations, where a possible situation may be smaller than a possible world), which brings Elbourne to the idea of mathematical modelling using set theory. After a discussion of the metaphysics of possible worlds and situations, he enthusiastically shows how the distribution of negative polarity items is revealingly treated in the referential theory of meaning using applied set theory. By the end of the chapter, although Elbourne does not quite concede that he finds the referential theory of meaning more advantageous than the internalist theory of meaning for the treatment of sentence meanings and compositionality, it would be easy for readers to have this impression nevertheless.

Chapter 5, the longest in the book, on the semantic properties of sentences, covers entailment, presupposition, and structural (i.e., syntactic) ambiguity. Elbourne introduces the classic debate in the philosophy of language regarding whether the sentence *The King of France is bald* is false or is neither true nor false (i.e., it lacks a true value) given that there has not been a King of France since after 1848. The difference between these two views depends on whether the meaning of the definite description *the King of France* asserts (Russell) or presupposes (Frege–Strawson) that there is exactly

one King of France. As an elaborate example of structural ambiguity, Elbourne argues that the sentence *John put the block in the box on the table in the kitchen* is six ways ambiguous as a result of structural ambiguity, providing trees for the three most obvious interpretations. He also discusses ambiguities that result from the interaction of quantifier phrases, as in the well-known example *Every man loves some woman*, which may mean that every man loves some woman or other, or that some woman is such that every man loves her. This difference can also be viewed as structural ambiguity if more a more abstract level of syntactic representation known as Logical Form is adopted.

In chapter 6, on meaning and grammar, Elbourne shows in fair detail how sentence meanings can be compositionally derived by pairing applied set theory and the lambda notation together with syntactic structures. As an example, he illustrates the derivation of the meaning of the sentence *Mary sees Fido* as set of possible worlds assuming its standard syntactic structure, which contains two noun phrases and a verb phrase. In this chapter and the previous one, we seem to be working squarely within the referential theory of meaning, but this fact (if it is a fact) is not highlighted. Elbourne briefly mentions the internalist theory of meaning at the very end of the chapter, saying that a mathematical model is (or should be) compatible with the internalist theory of meaning even if the mathematical model cannot be understood literally in the case of the internalist theory of meaning.

If chapters 5 and 6 are concerned with the semantics–syntax interface, chapter 7, entitled "Meaning and context", addresses the semantics–pragmatics interface. Elbourne begins with the problem of indexicals – words such as *I, you, here, now, today*, and *tomorrow* – and shows how their meaning depends on the context of utterance, leading to the famous distinction between the *content* and the *character* (Kaplan) of an utterance of a declarative sentence. He points out that it is essential to distinguish indexical uses of pronouns from bound-variable uses of pronouns, which are bound by a quantifier, for example, the use of *he* in *Every boy thinks that he is the strongest* on the meaning that the value of *he* varies with the boy chosen. Elbourne then turns to more radical cases of dependence on the context of utterance, where the meaning of an utterance is pragmatically enriched. Well-known examples include an utterance of *It is raining*, which is usually understood to mean 'it is raining here' (not: 'It is raining some place or other'), an utterance of *I haven't eaten*, which is usually taken to mean 'I haven't eaten dinner' or 'I haven't eaten lunch' (not: 'I haven't eaten ever'), and and an utterance of *Everyone was asleep*, which is usually understood as 'everyone in a given group of people was asleep' (not: 'everyone in the world was asleep'). Elbourne describes two approaches to such examples, one in which syntactic structures are enriched with covert indexicals that need to be interpreted and another (Relevance Theory) in which implicit content is added in context to the output of the compositional semantics. Finally, Elbourne introduces the notion of implicature as used in Grice's theory of conversation, showing how, for example, an utterance of *I haven't eaten* could be understood as implicating that the speaker would like to go to a restaurant. Perhaps the only prominent topic missing in this chapter is speech acts (Austin–Searle), but otherwise the chapter is a gripping read, with a number of telling examples.

Chapter 8 is the final major chapter, entitled "Meaning and thought", which addresses the perennial question of whether language influences the way we think, and if so, to what extent. In this chapter, we are back in a territory that is more likely to interest laypeople. Elbourne carefully distinguishes three versions of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: the strong version, the restricted version, and the "watered-down" version. He shows that the strong version is falsified by evidence that people (e.g., babies and rare cases of adults who didn't learn a language) can make conceptual distinctions in the absence of language. He finds the restricted version more plausible but points out that it is often overlooked that if language can influence the way we think, why could the way we think not also influence our language? In other words, why could the direction of causation not also go from the way we think to language? In this connection, Elbourne describes the celebrated case of the Pirahã language (spoken by the isolated Pirahã people in the Lowland Amazonia region of Brazil), which lacks words for numbers above two, and psycholinguistic experiments have shown that Pirahã speakers do not perform well in making conceptual distinctions about number. Although this may initially appear to be a case of language influencing thought, it may also be a case of thought influencing language if one assumes that the Pirahã have not had the need to make conceptual distinctions about number. If this is accepted, then even the weak version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis could be rejected. Elbourne finds the "watered-down" version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, according to which our stereotypical thinking about some topics is influenced by the language we speak, the only version that is maintainable. He cites psycholinguistic experiments showing that speakers of German and Spanish are slightly but significantly influenced by how their language encodes grammatical gender, specifically, the distinction between masculine and feminine, so that, for example, the meaning of a word with feminine gender is stereotypically perceived by speakers as having more feminine traits. Even so, this influence is fleeting and easily vanishes upon reflection.

Elbourne concludes his guide in chapter 9, which is a short statement about what he personally believes about meaning, namely, that he prefers the internalist theory of meaning according to which meanings are concepts in people's heads. Chapter 9 is followed by "Sources and further reading" for each chapter and then an index. I might add that the book is well-edited and virtually free of typographical errors or awkward formulations. It is a delight to read.

Elbourne, P. (2011). *Meaning: A slim guide to semantics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. viii + 174 pages.