

Wierzbicka, Anna. *The semantics of grammar*. Amsterdam/ Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1988. [Vol. 18, *Studies in Language Companion Series*]. xiv + 229PP. US\$93.00 (ha), \$24.95 (pb).

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The Semantics of Grammar (SG) is another in a long list of publications by Professor Anna Wierzbicka (AW).¹ It follows her interest in defining and establishing empirically a semantic metalanguage which can be used to describe the lexicon and grammar of any language.

The book begins (pp. 1-20) with a clear summary of the semantic metalanguage which AW proposes, as well as the theory and philosophy which lies behind it.

There are two main parts to SG: the first section is on the semantics of syntax and the second on the semantics of morphology. Although a number of the chapters are published elsewhere, each has been revised for SG. Under syntax the chapters are: The semantics of English complementation in a cross-linguistic perspective; Ethno-syntax and the philosophy of grammar; The semantics of causative constructions in a cross-linguistic perspective; The Japanese 'adversative' passive in a typology context (Are grammatical categories vague or multiply polysemous?); Why you 'have a drink' when you can't '*have an eat?'; and The semantics of 'internal dative' in English. The chapters on morphology are: The meaning of a case: a study of Polish dative; The semantics of case marking; What's in a noun? (Or: how do nouns differ in meaning from adjectives?); and Oats and wheat: mass nouns, iconicity, and human categorization.

In this review I will discuss several chapters, although briefly, which I believe are relevant to studies in Papuan languages.² First, however, what are some of the basic concepts which underlie AW's view of language? One is that there is no boundary between denotational or pragmatic meanings in the lexicon or the grammar (p.2); Secondly, language is subjective, anthropocentric and reflects cultural modes of social interaction (idem); Thirdly, semantics encompasses

lexicon, grammar and illocutionary structure as well, with an 'essential unity' (p.3); Fourthly, a precise and formal semantic metalanguage can be developed which is simple and intuitively understandable in natural language sentences (p.9); and finally, there are universal grammatical meanings and these can be described using the techniques which SG proposes throughout.

The test of SG is immediately put to the test on English complementation (pp. 23-168). The range of constructions covered are: (1) TO and 'wanting' (to be constructions, remember and forget, verbs of volition and attempting, speech act verbs, interactional verbs); (2) TO and opinion (subject-to-object raising, to be deletion, subject-to-subject raising, the relationship of TO of opinion and TO of volition); (3) ING and time (gerund and simultaneity, gerunds and NPs, TO, ING and action, ING and evaluation); (4) TO, ING and aspectuals (constraints on TO complements, the 'doubl-ing constraint', aspectual causatives); (5) TO and emotions (emotion, awareness and thought, attitudes, 'projective emotions'); (6) FOR TO versus TO (in emotion sentences of various kinds); (7) THAT and knowledge (say THAT and know THAT, THAT sentences with a modal, etc.); and (8) The subjunctive: a cross-linguistic perspective (verbs of volition, emotion, evaluation).

AW raises questions on previous analyses of all of these topics and establishes "the semantic basis of English complementation" (p. 168). Each topic is set forth in the framework of the metalexicon and propositional outlines which display the essential semantics of the construction under discussion. As an example of the reasoning and formulations in SG consider the discussion of THAT (p.163). AW argues that THAT complements can be derived from either SAY or KNOW clauses and further, that the SAY clauses can be reduced to the KNOW type. In the sentence: "Mary says that Stalin was a Georgian," the underlying structure is: Mary says this: 'this is a fact: Stalin was a Georgian', or in other words, 'one can know this: Stalin was a Georgian'. This type of sentence contrasts with one like "It is possible that there is life on Mars," which reduces to: if someone says this: 'this is a fact: there is life on Mars'; I will say this: it is possible.

Problems multiply in any attempt to simply translate the metalexicon and its propositional formulations into another language, such as Tok Pisin. This highlights the approach used in SG and, in fact, demonstrates the need for a

precise analysis of the semantics of Tok Pisin, followed by the use of a consistent and adequate metavocabulary.

The chapter on ethno-syntax and the philosophy of grammar describes bodily actions and events, the good/bad dichotomy, and the unknown. AW gives an account of the syntax of representative sentences in a number of languages. She reflects Whorfian concerns, but within a specified semantic framework that is rigid and consistent. She therefore bridges the so-called cultural and grammatical domains by covering topics that are not described in current formal grammars, excluding as they do any mentalistic considerations.

Chapter three deals with the semantics of causative constructions. It includes data from Japanese, English, Hindi, French, Italian, and Russian and concludes with a suggested typology. The meanings of each type of causative in the various languages are identified and explicated by means of a propositional metalanguage. Throughout the volume AW continues her exhortation that "we need a semantic metalanguage for a cross-cultural comparison of meaning" (p.255). Her proposals can in fact be tested on the causative constructions of languages of the Pacific, or anywhere.

The study of the so-called Japanese adversative passive (ch. 4) concludes with an outline of the ten varieties which AW analyses as underlying the passive category. The semantic propositions and metalexicon which are proposed in various forms throughout SG differentiate the meanings. The forms of the passives are all related, but their semantic differences are clearly shown.

AW is interested in the semantics of particular words and phrases, including what is usually called idioms, in the light of their syntactic frames and contrasts. She deals with such problems in chapters 5 and 10 in particular, where she discusses differences like *have a drink* vs. **have an eat*, or the logic of semantic groups like *oats* and *wheat*. She carefully summarizes the subtypes of the constructions which arise due to her analysis.

In Ch. 3 some 13 construction types are semantically identified for have. The semantic difference between simple-verb and have a V constructions is aspectual (p. 297), with the actions seen as repeatable. The subtypes include additional

semantic components such as 'aimless objectless action which could cause one to feel good' (subtype 1), 'semi-volunteer action which could cause one to feel better (subtype 4), and 'self-directed action which could cause one to look better (subtype 8).

I found Ch. 10, entitled "Oats and wheat: mass nouns, iconicity, and human categorization", the most interesting in the book. In it AW questions the classical and recent work and definitions on mass and count nouns. She shows, from a number of languages, that understanding cultural conceptualization is *necessary*, if one is to identify universal semantic principles or language-specific details (p. 503). Her summary of the class meaning shows that there are some 14 specific subtypes, each with a semantic explication demonstrating contrasts and similarities.

There are also chapters which deal with case: the Polish dative (ch.7); the English 'internal' dative; and the general semantics of case marking (ch. 8), which uses Russian and Polish in particular for examples. In every instance the marking of case is shown to be semantically motivated. These chapters are a foremost contribution to the grammar of clause constructions.

Chapter 9 discusses grammatical classes, viz. nouns and adjectives in respect to their meanings, as classes. Differences in meaning are reflected in their syntactic behaviour, and AW proposes "that it is not only the distinction between 'nominals' and verbs which is universal...; but that the category of 'noun' as such may also be universal..." (p.493), and that it is defined in terms of its semantic structure.

¹For example, for two recent works see her 1985 (*Lexicography and conceptual analysis*. Ann Arbor:Karoma) on lexicography, and 1987 (*English speech act verbs: a semantic dictionary*. New York: Academic Press) on speech act verbs in English.

²One of the tests of a theory such as the one AW proposes is its application to 'cross-linguistic' data, such as from languages which are quite diverse in lexicon, syntax or morphology.