

Nicholas ASHER. *Lexical Meaning in Context. A Web of Words*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2011. p. 332. Hardback. ISBN 978-1-107-00539-6.

Purificação Silvano
puri.msilvano@gmail.com
Centro de Linguística da Universidade do Porto (Portugal)

Lexical semantic studies have uncovered interesting phenomena concerning the meaning of words. However, they have been lacking a proper formal framework equipped with the necessary tools to account for and model the different meanings of words in context.

The book *Lexical Meaning in Context. A Web of Words*, by Nicholas Asher, aims precisely at developing a lexical theory within formal semantics able to describe, explain and model phenomena such as copredication, restricted predication and coercion. Based on the idea that, although their meanings are relatively simple, words occur in predications, which can be rather complicated, the author argues that an adequate theory has to represent the interactions between discourse, predication and lexical content. It follows that the meanings of words can only be established in terms of their denotations and the restrictions that the words with which they are combined impose on them.

The theory that Nicholas Asher proposes is named *Type Compositional Logic* (TCL) and resorts to *Typed Lambda Calculus* extended with other types, to a *Categorial Model for Types* and to the *Segmented Discourse Representation Theory*, from Asher and Lascarides (2003). In this formal model, each term is assigned a particular type ($\alpha:a$) in a certain predicational context. Since most words have arguments, the term imposes restrictions on the type of its arguments. The author argues that these type requirements present a kind of presupposed content, which he calls *type presuppositions* and which must be satisfied or, if necessary, accommodated through operations of type adjustments. For instance, in the lexical entry *tree*, the predicate's type presupposition is that its argument must be of type *P*, that is, *physical object*.

The theory proposed by Asher is able to account for very challenging lexical problems: predication involving dual or multiple aspect nouns, that is, nouns which denote properties of two different aspects or facets; restricted predications; various cases of coercion, namely with verbs like *enjoy*, with verbs such as *start*, *begin*, *finish*, *end*, with evaluative adjectives, with pluralities, among others. All of these phenomena feature a conflict between the typing demands of a predicate and its arguments, and to handle this problem two new complex types are proposed: •type and polymorphic or dependent type. The former applies to dual aspect nouns and restricted predications. An example of a dual aspect noun is *Book*, which has both physical and informational aspect, as exemplified in (1).

- (1) John picked up and mastered three books. (Asher (2011:175))
BOOK: PHYSICAL•INFORMATION

Restricted predication is found in grammatical constructions of which the *as* phrase is an example (cf.(2)).

- (2) John *as a judge* is corrupt. (Asher (2011:201))

As phrases introduce •types and coerce their subjects into something with several aspects, one of which is defined by their complement clause. In the example given, the predication coerces *John* into having a complex type, of which *being a judge* is a constituent, and it states that there is an aspect (*being a judge*) and that part is *corrupt*.

The polymorphic or dependent type is a particular type that depends on the type of the modifier's argument and is involved in coercions. For instance, *RED* is a dependent type as shown in example (3).

- (3) John hates everything red – red meat, red apples, red shirts, and so on. (Asher (2011:42))

The book is organised in three parts: part one – *Foundations*, part two – *Theory*, part three – *Development*; part four – *Coda*.

In the first part, the author raises some basic questions, establishes some

pertinent distinctions and makes some enlightening observations concerning not only different sorts of predication but also the theories used to describe them. In section one, entitled *Lexical Meaning and Predication*, he presents the lexical phenomena that will be object of study and shows how their description benefits from the consideration of types of different sort, of types presuppositions and of the discursive context. At the end of this section, the author sums up the main points of the book regarding its goal and the chosen framework. Section 2, *Types and Lexical Meaning*, is mainly concerned with the definition of types. In section 3, *Previous Theories of Predication*, the author critically revises some of the proposals of predication to conclude that in general they failed to adequately explain the lexical problems that are under the scope of any lexical theory.

In the second part of the book, the author puts forward the theory that was motivated in the first part, that is, *Type Compositional Logic* (TCL). In addition to explaining how the theory works and how it deals with type presupposition justification, he defines two new types, *•type and polymorphic or dependent type*, and accounts for the justification of *•type presuppositions* in TCL.

In part three, the author applies the theory to restricted predication (section 7), to different sorts of coercion (sections 8 and 9), to four syntactic and morphosyntactic constructions: grinding, genitive, resultative constructions and nominalisation (section 10) and to other kinds of predication, namely metaphorical predication (section 11). This part ends with generalisations and conclusions (section 12).

The last part is composed of the references and index.

All in all, this book constitutes an important milestone within lexical semantics because of the sound, thorough, wide-ranging and comprehensive analysis it puts forward. Theoretical principles of TCL such as type assignment, types presupposition and the context sensitivity of types provide a grounded explanation of the meaning of different sorts of predication in a natural and fine-grained manner. Even if one does not master the formal representations of the analysis, this book is a valuable resource for those who want to learn more about how words interact to produce meaning, sometimes in a much intertwined web. Untangling this web of words, “truly a marvellous creation of human kind” (Asher (2011:320)), can be bewildering, but we cannot, nonetheless, avoid being drawn into it.

REFERENCES

- Asher, N. 2011. *Lexical Meaning in Context. A Web of Words*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Asher, N.; Lascarides, A. 2003. *Logics of Conversation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.