

# Much more than an introduction to the language-specific lexical semantics

Igor Marko GLIGORIĆ

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb

An exceptional contribution to Croatian linguistics, Slavistics, and undoubtedly linguistics in general, was published by Matrix Croatica (*Matica Hrvatska*) in 2024. The book, *Introduction to Lexical Semantics of the Croatian Language (Uvod u leksičku semantiku hrvatskoga jezika)* by Tatjana Pišković, currently an associate professor at the Department of Croatian Language at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb, represents a landmark achievement. The manuscript was reviewed by three distinguished linguists – Maja Bratanić, Branimir Belaj, and Ida Raffaelli – all esteemed figures in their fields. This book cannot be simply categorized as a scientific monograph or a university textbook on lexical semantics, as its scope – both in depth and broadness of the approach – surpasses such classifications, moving toward an encyclopaedic treatment of the central topic.

In the *Preface*, the author highlights the complexity of studying meaning, carefully delineating fundamental concepts and the domain explored in the detailed examination and analysis that follows. The various levels at which different branches of linguistic semantics are named overlap with one another (cf. Pišković, 2024, p. 6). This acknowledgment underscores the author's awareness that semantics

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resists rigid boundaries far more than grammar does. Consequently, the phenomena analysed and interpreted cannot be classified with equal clarity and precision. Pišković identifies this very fact as one reason why certain linguistic approaches have entirely distanced themselves from meaning. However, the author recognizes this area as a space that can and should inspire curiosity and creativity, as she describes it as something that “liberates and delights” (ibid.).

Pišković views lexical semantics as the study of word meanings, which can, to some extent, be contrasted with morphology, the study of word forms. The book is structured into two main parts: the first provides a *Brief History of Lexical Semantics (Kratka povijest leksičke semantike)*, while the second analyses the *Basic Topics in Lexical Semantics (Osnovne teme leksičke semantike)*. It is worth noting that the *Brief History of Lexical Semantics* could perhaps have been expanded – though this is not a critique – yet it still includes all significant elements relevant to the diachronic development of this linguistic discipline. On the other hand, in the section on *Basic Topics in Lexical Semantics*, the author explores fundamental concepts and lexical-semantic relations. However, her approach, supported by examples that substantiate her conclusions and illustrate lexical-semantic phenomena, opens up much more complex and broader considerations of lexical semantics than the term “basic” might imply.

As indicated by the title, the first part of the book offers a brief history of lexical semantics. Drawing on relevant scholars, Pišković divides the history of lexical semantics into five major periods. She explains that the focus is on illustrating the beginnings and foundations of each approach discussed, rather than recent or specialized studies within these frameworks. This method of presenting theoretical foundations is both understandable and justified, particularly given the book’s primary purpose.

Despite the deliberate exclusion of detailed analyses of each approach to word meaning mentioned, the first part of the *Introduction* exceeds readers’ expectations. Pišković provides a chronological and causal description of pre-structuralist diachronic semantics, structuralist semantics, generative semantics, neo-structuralist semantics,

and cognitive semantics, offering readers a clear diachronic overview of the study of word meaning. She highlights, discusses, and illustrates the approaches of M. Bréal and H. Paul, classifies semantic changes, and identifies some of the lasting contributions of pre-structuralist diachronic semantics, including those in a Croatian context. She also extensively explores structuralist critiques of pre-structuralism, the theory of lexical fields, as well as European and American componential analysis. Separate subsections are devoted to relational semantics and the general contributions of structuralist semantics, with a specific focus on those in Croatian. The clarity and methodology employed in the first two subsections reveal the author's consistent approach throughout the text.

In the subsection on generative semantics, Pišković correctly identifies the dominance of syntax over semantics during this period. She examines Katzian semantics, generative and interpretative semantics, and the contributions inherited from this era. Regarding neo-structuralist semantics, she systematically analyses two perspectives: the neo-structuralist componential approach to lexical meaning and the relational approach. The former includes subsections on natural semantic metalanguage, conceptual semantics, two-level semantics, and generative lexicon theory. The further chapters consider WordNet, meaning-text theory, and corpus-based distributional analysis. As with the other sections, Pišković concludes this part by identifying neo-structuralist semantic influences in Croatian.

When discussing cognitive semantics, Pišković observes the blurring of boundaries between meaning and usage, that is, the boundaries traditionally embodied in the distinction between semantics and pragmatics. She analyses core concepts of cognitive linguistics, including prototype theory, conceptual metaphor and metonymy, and conceptual integration. She also examines various structures of encyclopaedic knowledge within cognitive semantics, such as the idealized cognitive model and frame semantics. Following her established methodology, Pišković also explores cognitive semantics in Croatian.

The final subsection considers the development of lexical semantics as cyclical. The author notes that the first three subsections

follow one another chronologically, while the last two emerge simultaneously with the third. She also emphasizes that all these approaches still coexisted at the time of writing this book, which she explicitly states (*ibid.*: 153). The *Preface* makes it clear that the first part of the book serves to justify the theoretical and methodological choices made in the second part (*ibid.*: 7). Furthermore, it announces that all the mentioned approaches will be integrated into an understanding of lexical-semantic concepts, a promise that is consistently fulfilled.

The second part of this encyclopaedic publication is motivated by what Pišković describes as propaedeutic practice. It begins with the definition of key terms such as word, lexeme, and lexicon, as well as lexical meaning and traditionally recognized lexical-semantic relations and phenomena.

In the first chapter of the second part, the concepts of words, lexemes, grammar, and lexicons are examined from various perspectives. The author questions the division into open and closed word classes, distinguishes lexicon, lexical inventory, and dictionary, and discusses the status of lexemes in the dictionary and the concept of listemes.

The second chapter is dedicated to lexical meaning. The author attempts to define it in terms of meaning alone, then in terms of lexical and pragmatic meaning. Various triadic models – models of lexical triangles – are illustrated and commented upon. Attention is then focused on different types of lexical meaning and the metalexical aspect, where Pišković addresses the issue of defining words, lexemes, and lexical meaning.

As the author herself notes in the *Preface* (*ibid.*: 7), the central chapter is devoted to polysemy. The chapter begins with defining this, offering not only definitions but also thoughtful interpretations of the reasons and mechanisms behind lexical polysemy. Highlighting the cognitive basis of polysemy, she particularly addresses the mechanisms of polysemy: lexical metaphor, lexical metonymy, and lexical synecdoche. It is especially worth emphasizing the examples provided by the author, as well as her original and clear distinction between metonymy and synecdoche within the cognitive-linguistic framework.

The next subsection deals with homonymy. It is important to note that, methodologically, homonymy is consistently contrasted with polysemy, with the often-blurred boundaries and the relationship between polysemy and homonymy in lexicography and psycholinguistics being highlighted. The discussion – faithfully following the principles of scientific elaboration – is preceded by a problematization of the origin of homonyms.

The next subsection is dedicated to what many consider one of the prototypical lexical-semantic – i.e. conceptual – relations: antonymy. It is discussed as a perfect lexical-semantic relation (ibid: 391–395). As readers might expect from the earlier elaboration of semantic concepts, Pišković offers a dual classification of antonyms: morphological and semantic. Moreover, she does not disappoint more demanding readers by examining the relationship between polysemy and polyantonymy.

On the other hand, synonymy is addressed. Understandably, it is defined as an imperfect lexical-semantic relation. Again, the author adheres to a consistent methodological framework. Within this, she identifies synonymy as a graded category or phenomenon, distinguishing various levels of synonymity. More or less predictably – depending on the reader's profile – explanations are provided for the relationships between polysemy and polysynonymy, synonymy and the dictionary, and synonymy and paronymy.

The hierarchy of lexical units is examined in two chapters: one on hyponymy and the other on meronymy. In discussing hyponymy, Pišković analyses lexical hierarchy and lexical inclusion, taxonomy, and other types of hyponymic relations. Here, taxonomy is understood as a representative example of hyponymy. The author also explores the phenomena of quasi-hyponymy, polysemy, and polyhyponymy, as well as the relationship between hyponymy and the dictionary.

The final chapter is dedicated to meronymy. Partonymy and other types of meronymic relations are central to the discussion of this lexical-semantic relation. Similarly to the discussion on hyponymy, quasi-meronymy is specifically analysed and illustrated, with particular attention being paid to its similarity to quasi-hyponymy. The chapter concludes with definitions and examples of automeronymy,

supermeronymy, and polymeronymy, as well as an analysis of the relationship between meronymy and the dictionary.

At the end of the book, there is an extensive bibliography. The book also includes an index of names and terms, followed by a note about the author.

In the *Preface*, the author notes that the book is partly an introductory work, designed as a university textbook – a manual for teachers and students, a book intended to benefit each of these two target groups in a way that meets their specific needs and expectations. However, it is clear that Pišković's latest work goes beyond the framework of a university textbook or scientific monograph, and is much more than that. The interesting and contemporary examples, with which the author makes her highly professional and linguistically articulated text more accessible to readers, are a notable strength of this publication. Additionally, the book consistently considers dictionary definitions of lexemes and their concrete usage, balancing these two aspects of the linguistic nature of language units.

A review of a book like *Introduction to the Lexical Semantics of the Croatian Language (Uvod u leksičku semantiku hrvatskoga jezika)* could be written in at least two ways. Here, we could have highlighted the most interesting and important elements according to subjective judgment. However, we chose to present the entirety and broadness encompassed by Pišković's 615 pages of original content. While we acknowledge that this approach might seem less precise – and it surely is at some extent – we consider cataloguing the topics covered by the author in her book to be far more important.

This reflects the totality of the author's knowledge of lexical semantics, her outstanding understanding of concepts and her ability to navigate the field she writes about, and thus interested readers will not be disappointed by the book. The target audience is primarily Crostists, Slavists, linguists and students of these (philological) studies. However, given the nature of meaning as not only a linguistic category, Pišković's work will also enlighten readers who view the linguistic formations of conceptual material differently: sociologically, anthropologically, philosophically, psychologically, and so on, or simply in a practical way, as users of language. This

monographic-textbook-encyclopaedic work will thus find its audience in the most diverse reader groups, who will find much to discover, learn and consider between its covers.

## Reference

Pišković, T. (2024). *Uvod u leksičku semantiku hrvatskoga jezika*. Zagreb: Matica hrvatska.