Semantics in generative grammar. By Irene Heim & Angelika Kratzer. Malden
& Oxford: Blackwell, 1998. Pp. ix, 324.

Introduction to natural language semantics. By Henriëtte de Swart. Stanford:
CSLI Publications, 1998. Pp. xiv, 257.

Although there aren't that many text books on formal semantics, their average
quality is quite good, and these two recent additions don't lower the standard
by any means. 'Semantics in generative grammar' (SGG) is the more innovative
of the two. As its title indicates, SGG focuses its attention on the
syntax/semantics interface, with particular emphasis on quantification and
anaphora. These two subjects are discussed in considerable detail, while many
others receive only a cursory treatment or are not addressed at all. We learn
from the preface that this was a deliberate choice: 'We want to help students
develop the ability for semantic analysis, and, in view of this goal, we think that
exploring a few topics in detail is more effective than offering a bird's-eye view
of everything.' (p. ix) Having enjoyed the results of Heim and Kratzer's
explorations, I can only agree with this judgment.

SGG falls into three main parts. The first part introduces the two notions that
are at the heart of the formal semantics enterprise, viz. truth conditions and
compositionality, and then goes on to develop a compositional truth-
conditional semantics for a core fragment of English. The second part discusses
variable binding and quantification, and the third part is an in-depth discussion
of anaphora. All these developments are kept within an extensional framework.

Intensional phenomena are addressed only briefly, in the last chapter of the book.

The arrangement of 'Introduction to natural language semantics' (NLS) is a more conventional one. The first half of the book provides a general overview of the field, followed by an introduction to propositional and predicate logic. It is only in the second half of the book that the reader is led beyond classical logic and towards such topics as dynamic semantics and generalized quantifiers. Like SGG, the bulk of NLS remains within extensional bounds, and intensional phenomena are discussed only in the last chapter. NLS is intended as a first introduction to the field of semantics, and doesn't presuppose any background in logic or linguistics. SGG is more demanding: it is targeted at graduate and advanced undergraduate levels, and will be hard going for students who aren't familiar with the basic ideas of generative grammar; a nodding acquaintance with classical logic will prove useful, too, but is not indispensable.

From a logical point of view, the propositional and predicate calculi are absolutely essential, which is why in your typical introduction to logic they take centre stage. But from the point of view of linguistic semantics there is nothing natural about standard first-order logic. On the contrary, it is a well-established fact that this theory affords a procrustean treatment of semantics at best. Truth-functional analyses of <u>and</u>, <u>or</u>, <u>not</u>, and <u>if … then</u> range between inadequate and woefully incomplete, and the notion of unary first-order quantification which is the essence of classical predicate logic is too narrow for natural language, for a variety of familiar reasons. There are no compelling grounds, therefore, why an introduction to linguistic semantics should pay too much attention to classical

logic. If nonetheless an introductory course starts off with a discussion of the standard theory of connectives and quantifiers, it will inevitably reach the point at which it must be revealed that, and then explained why, this theory is ill-suited as a foundation for linguistic semantics. This is how it goes in most textbooks, and NLS is no exception. One of the commendable innovations of SGG is that it ignores classical logic almost completely. Truth functions are introduced <u>en passant</u>, as part of an exercise, after the semantic interpretation of NP-VP structures has been dealt with (p. 23), and the obligatory remarks on the inadequacies of unary first-order quantification are relegated to a small excursion (pp. 189-193).

One of the main reasons why SGG makes for such stimulating reading is that it deals in fairly great depth with a small but highly coherent collection of topics. One would not perhaps expect an introductory text like this to embark on thorough-going discussions of argument structure, presuppositions of quantifiers, or <u>in situ</u> vs. movement interpretation of quantified NPs, but that is what SGG does, and as they say in artistic circles: it works. In this respect, too, NLS is more conservative. It addresses a much broader range of themes than SGG does, and indeed parts of the book are perhaps too crowded (e.g. the first two chapters and the last one), while some topics don't receive the attention they deserve. This applies, for example, to the key concepts of truth conditions and compositionality, which appear only briefly at a number of points, and should have been discussed in greater depth and at an earlier juncture.

The only complaint I have about SGG is perhaps an inevitable one. It is that, in my opinion, a number of themes are unjustly ignored or addressed too briefly.

This holds, in particular, for two topics that are given a fair amount of attention in NLS: generalized quantifiers and dynamic semantics. NLS devotes an excellent chapter to generalized quantifier theory and its applications, and this chapter would have fitted in beautifully with SGG's discussion of quantification, which as it stands has little or nothing to say about the weak/strong distinction, existential <u>there</u>-sentences, or negative polarity items, for example. A more serious omission, in my opinion, is that SGG does not even mention so-called dynamic theories of semantic interpretation, which were first proposed by Hans Kamp and Irene Heim in the beginning of the eighties, and have had a formidable impact on the field. It is a pity that SGG ignores these developments not only because they are important, but also because Heim and Kratzer devote an entire chapter to the most prominent competitor to the dynamic account of anaphora, viz. the E-type analysis, thus creating an imbalance which blemishes an otherwise flawless text.

The concept of meaning gives rise to much deeper foundational issues than most other key concepts of linguistics, like syntactic structure, for example. Of course, there is an ongoing debate over what syntactic structures are, but that is a parochial affair in comparison to the controversies that keep on raging over meaning. And there is quite a lot at stake, too, since the concept of meaning plays a central role not only in linguistics but in philosophy and the (other) cognitive sciences, as well. Some linguists will have wondered why their colleagues in the philosophy departments are so concerned with, and divided about, the semantics of proper names, say, but the answer is really straightforward: one's views on the meaning of names are inextricably tied up with his views on meaning, the status of semantic theory, the foundations of

cognitive science, and so on. Speaking more generally, it is virtually impossible to practice semantics without taking on board a couple of far-reaching philosophical premises. However, those readers who expect an introduction to semantics to provide an up to date overview of this intellectual minefield will be disappointed by SGG and NLS alike. These books confirm, if confirmation was needed, that linguistic semantics has almost completely severed its ties with the philosophical tradition from which it emerged not so long ago.

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