

## **Blackwell Handbooks in Linguistics**

### **The handbook of phonological theory**

**John A. Goldsmith, editor**

*Oxford: Blackwell, 1995. xiv + 986 pp.*

### **The handbook of child language**

**Paul Fletcher and Brian MacWhinney, editors**

*Oxford: Blackwell, 1995. ix + 786 pp.*

### **The handbook of contemporary semantic theory**

**Shalom Lappin, editor**

*Oxford: Blackwell, 1996. xvii + 670 pp.*

The aim of this new series is to provide a volume-by-volume in-depth coverage of all areas of linguistics. Further books planned include phonetic sciences (Hardcastle and Laver), morphology (Zwicky and Spencer), sociolinguistics (Coulmas), and historical linguistics (Joseph and Janda). The first three published volumes show that the series is aimed at the seriously committed student of a subject who wants an overview of contemporary thinking. The books presuppose that the reader has already taken a course or two in the subject. Especially in phonology and semantics, we are given the impression of fields which are currently developing very rapidly.

The books are not textbooks, or collections of conference or research

papers, but somewhere in between. The authors are all recognized specialists in their field, and they have plainly been instructed to stand back a little, and make a statement about what is going on in their subject – ‘to offer a new synthesis of the ideas that are currently in the field’, as the preface to the *Phonology* volume puts it. The contributors vary greatly in their ability to do this. Some papers are models of clarity and exposition; others are almost impenetrable without a considerable level of achievement in the subject already. Some authors spend a great deal of space looking nervously over their shoulders at their colleagues, and including a great deal of conceptual refinement, scrupulous referencing, and footnote qualification; others are much readier to simplify and generalize. The most accessible is *Child Language*; *Semantics* is at the opposite extreme; and *Phonology* sits somewhere in the middle.

### Semantics

The semantics volume is difficult because, as its title makes clear, we are dealing here with those topics in semantic theory which have attracted specialists in recent years – and this means a great deal of formalism, much of it inspired by the theoretical perspective provided by Richard Montague in the 1970s. The book does not try to be introductory or comprehensive, and its 22 papers are organized thematically rather than by theoretical approach. After a helpful history of formal semantics in linguistic theory (by Barbara Partee), there are papers on generalized quantifier theory; the interface between syntax and semantics; anaphora, discourse, and modality; focus, presupposition, and negation; tense; questions; plurals; computational semantics; lexical semantics; and semantics and related domains (logic, cognition, pragmatics, philosophy).

The editor provides a useful overview, drawing attention to five themes: the way interpretation is today being analysed as a dynamic process; the expansion in the resources now available to analyse meanings formally; the relationship between syntax and semantics; whether there is an autonomous level of semantic representation; and the problem of relating research in lexical semantics with formal semantics, given the lack of a common theoretical framework.

### Phonology

The remarkable proliferation of approaches to non-linear phonology in recent years is the theme of this book, and in 32 chapters such topics as syllable structure, metrical structure, underspecification theory, feature geometry, tone, and vowel harmony are dealt with in depth. Some of

these chapters are models of exposition, such as that by Clements and Hume on the internal organization of speech sounds. There are separate chapters on phonological acquisition, language games ('ludlings'), experimental phonology, sound change, and the rapidly growing field of sign language phonology (where phonological notions are used to explicate manual contrasts). The final eight chapters focus on particular languages or language families which have attracted especial attention in recent years (Australian languages, Hausa tonology, Ethiopian languages, French, Japanese, Semitic, Slavic, and Spanish).

In another useful introduction, the editor identifies three traditional questions: what constitutes a phonological word in a given language (phonotactics)? what is the nature of phonological alternation? and what phonetic differences are contrastive? These questions are then used as one dimension of a grid, the other dimension distinguishing the three approaches of phonological representations, levels, and rules. Within this grid, he then locates the different issues at the centre of current phonological theory, such as licensing (at the intersection between phonotactics and levels), underspecification theory (where contrasts intersect with representations), and feature geometry (where alternations intersect with representations).

### **Child language**

This book groups its 25 papers into three parts: theory, method, and context; the emergence and consolidation of linguistic abilities; and non-normal language development. It is this last section which will be of particular interest to readers of *CLTT*. It begins with a review of computational approaches to the analysis of language impairment (Miller and Klee); there are separate chapters on phonological impairment (Leonard), grammatical impairment (Fletcher and Ingham), and pragmatic impairment (Craig); and the section ends with chapters on language development in Down syndrome and in children with early hemisphere damage.

While the whole of this book is of obvious relevance to anyone engaged in the task of child language teaching and therapy, certain chapters are more applicable than others. There are useful reviews of individual differences and of bilingual acquisition in Part 1, and Part 2 contains a series of chapters on phonetic, phonological, grammatical, and lexical development which provide a valuable updating course for anyone engaged in intervention. This book will be a core text for anyone's book-

shelf in the 1990s, in much the same way as the collection edited by Fletcher and Garman was for students in the 1980s.

### General comment

There is not much sign of editorial coherence in the series as a whole. There is no general editor, and structural decisions seem to have been made on an ad hoc basis. For example, each book lists contributors, but *Child Language* tells us only which university they belong to; *Phonology* adds their department and city; and *Semantics* gives full biodata on each one. *Semantics* has an introduction outside of the chapter structure; *Phonology* has an introduction which is listed as Chapter 1; and *Child Language* has three introductions, one for each of its three Parts. Two of the three books have prefaces. *Phonology* has a list of abbreviations; the other books do not.

The inconsistency is especially noticeable in the indexing, which is critical in a handbook concept with many contributing authors. Very few people are going to sit down and read these books through from left to right, so a really detailed index is essential to help readers find their way around (and one of these books is nearly 1000 pages). At least there ARE indexes, so one cheer for that. But there is no series-like consistency. *Semantics* has a single index which incorporates people and pays no attention to particular languages. *Phonology* has separate indexes of people, subjects, and languages. *Child Language* handles subjects and languages together, and pays hardly any attention to people. The different approaches could hardly be greater.

Moreover, the level of subject indexing varies greatly. *Semantics* is thinnest, with letter A, for example, receiving an average of only 2 references per entry; *Child Language* has 3 per entry; and *Phonology* has nearly 5. Here too there is no consistency, with *Semantics* using indented sub-entries, and *Phonology* run-on sub-entries. Even the typefaces are not always the same. Coverage, moreover, leaves a lot to be desired. The reader is continually finding relevant material which is unindexed. In *Phonology*, for example, which is the best of the three, we are given 25 references to *mora*, which might make you think that this subject has been well indexed; but the whole of Chapter 5 ('Skeletal positions and moras') deals with this topic, and no pages from that chapter are indexed at all!

The idea behind *Blackwells Handbooks in Linguistics* is certainly to be applauded. Books of this size allow a sharper focus on a subject than is possible in traditional textbook, journal, or encyclopedia formats. But

they are pricey (between £65 and £75, depending on length), and I am not sure how much time readers are getting for their money – how long, in other words, these handbooks will be able to maintain their feel of being at the cutting edge of the subject, given the speed at which these subjects are developing. The series would also benefit from tighter editorial control, not only in terms of presentation, as suggested above, but also in terms of content. At present, the level fluctuates wildly between advanced undergraduate and staff seminar: if future volumes could handle their material more evenly with the interests of the former group in mind (the latter is already well served with specialized journals), it would be no bad thing.