Buchbesprechung


One of the properties commonly associated with derivational morphology and word formation in general is the idiosyncratic nature of the target meanings. In this monograph, Pavel Štekauer searches for systematicity in the semantics of word formation. Based on his book Onomasiological Theory of English Word Formation (1998, reviewed by Klaus Hansen in ZAA 48), he conducts a series of experiments involving English nonce formations. The aim is to find regularities in how informants assign meanings to novel words without any contextual clues, clearly focusing on the hearer/interpreter.

That word formation involves a certain degree of semantic idiosyncrasy is widely known. It is therefore not feasible to determine one single correct meaning of a nonce formation (Štekauer uses the term 'naming unit'). The only result one can try to achieve is to rank a number of possible meanings with respect to their acceptability, and this is what the experimental study under discussion attempts. It is not immediately clear what such a ranking represents, however. A basic problem that every experimental investigation into the semantic interpretation of nonce formations – and thus also Štekauer’s book – has to tackle is the fact that the meaning of complex words is highly context-dependent. Štekauer – as well as many of the psycholinguistic studies that he refers to – explicitly excludes such contextual factors from consideration and limits himself to “context-free meaning predictability” (p. 55).

The first part of the book consists of an overview of the literature dealing with meaning predictability in word formation (Chapter 1), an outline of the theoretical framework in which Štekauer's study is couched (Chapter 2), a discussion of some general issues concerning meaning predictability and the factors involved, the differentiation of five 'Onomasiological Types' of word formation and a discussion of the main assumptions underlying the experiments (Chapter 3). With 141 pages the longest part of the book, Chapter 4 presents the design and the results of the experiments, followed by a list of conclusions in Chapter 5.

The literature survey in Chapter 1 is very informative, not the least because several of the psycholinguistic studies referred to are perhaps not familiar to theoretical morphologists.

Štekauer’s 'theory of predictability' outlined in Chapter 3 starts from the following assumptions: (i) the meaning predictability of novel complex 'naming units' is basically context-free (cf. above); (ii) lexical meaning, conceptualization and extra-linguistic knowledge are all relevant to the meaning-prediction process (an 'encyclopaedic' conception of semantics); (iii) native and non-native speakers do not differ significantly in their meaning prediction capacities; (iv) the extent to which a given meaning is predictable for some complex word is higher if this meaning involves what Štekauer calls 'prototypical senses', i.e., the prototypical features of the relevant referents.
In the next part of Chapter 3 Štekauer distinguishes five 'Onomasiological Types' of word formation and relates them to the process of meaning prediction. Roughly speaking, the sorting of 'Onomasiological Types' combines a structural classification of word formation types with the issue of which semantic components of the resulting meaning are represented in the relevant elements (again, see Štekauer's An Onomasiological Theory of English Word Formation [1998] for details).

The main body of the book comprises a description of the experiments. The author ran different types of experiments in which subjects were either presented with nonce formations and had to assign grades of acceptability to a number of possible meanings, or had to come up with a plausible interpretation of the words by themselves. There were 20 native speaker informants and a larger group of non-native speakers (Slovak and Polish students). Štekauer does not consider this a problem, pointing out that there are no significant differences between the two groups as far as the ratings are concerned. The 'Objectified Predictability Rate' of the relevant readings is then connected to predictions that Štekauer's theory of predictability makes. A weakness, in my view, is the complete lack of statistical significance testing. Since the number of subjects that were tested is relatively low and the author often attaches significance to tiny differences in his measures, it would have been helpful to see whether the differences are also significant in the statistical sense.

Chapter 5 takes up the issues discussed in Chapter 3 and reconsiders them in the light of the experimental results. The conclusions, which, on the whole, confirm the author's hypotheses, are mostly in the form of tendencies rather than categorical restrictions. It has been confirmed, for instance, that there is normally no single "correct" reading, but rather a number of potential interpretations, one or two of which are preferred over the others.

As for the exclusion of the speech context and the perspective of the speaker from the experimental study, I surmise that it somehow weakens the insights presented in this book. Indeed, one may suspect that the results will not adequately reflect actual linguistic behaviour and will therefore not shed too much light on the semantics of existing compounds and other complex words as they are used and understood in real speech (see also Laurie Bauer's comments in Morphological Productivity, 2001:123). The context-free interpretation of novel complex words can of course be studied in its own right, as Štekauer demonstrates. However, one may criticize Štekauer for downplaying this distinction in scope and not acknowledging that one of the reasons for excluding context and speaker perspective might be purely practical – it is much easier, if not the only possible way of doing it, to run experiments that exclude the context as a relevant factor.

To conclude, the book raises interesting and difficult questions, which are too easily overlooked if one just trusts in the received opinion that the semantic interpretation of complex words is only vaguely predictable from the meaning of their constitutive elements. In discussing his experimental results and relating them to theoretical issues in word formation, Štekauer is able to show that the meaning of complex English words is far from arbitrary and there are indeed preferences that need to be interpreted. Apart from the caveats concerning statistical significance and the special role of context-free interpretation mentioned above, the book gives the interested reader new insight into the meaning predictability of complex words.

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