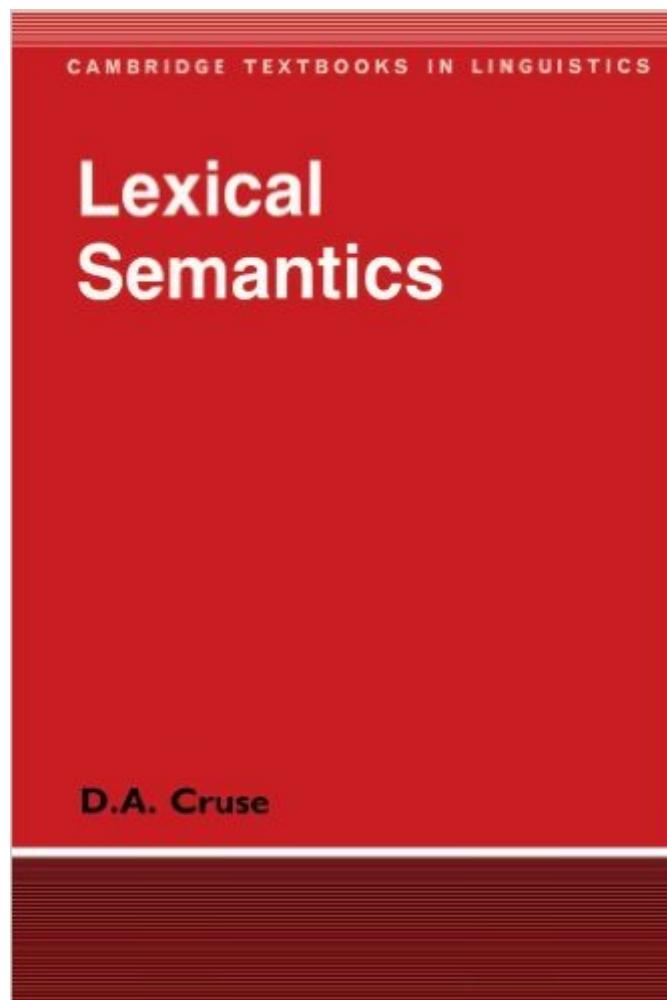


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Lexical Semantics (Cambridge Textbooks In Linguistics)



Synopsis

Lexical Semantics is about the meaning of words. Although obviously a central concern of linguistics, the semantic behaviour of words has been unduly neglected in the current literature, which has tended to emphasize sentential semantics and its relation to formal systems of logic. In this textbook D. A. Cruse establishes in a principled and disciplined way the descriptive and generalizable facts about lexical relations that any formal theory of semantics will have to encompass. Among the topics covered in depth are idomaticity, lexical ambiguity, synonymy, hierarchical relations such as hyponymy and meronymy, and various types of oppositeness. Syntagmatic relations are also treated in some detail. The discussions are richly illustrated by examples drawn almost entirely from English. Although a familiarity with traditional grammar is assumed, readers with no technical linguistic background will find the exposition always accessible. All readers with an interest in semantics will find in this original text not only essential background but a stimulating new perspective on the field.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

A mature science, like Physics, has a panoply of formalisms, apparatus, and methods for making epistemic progress. But in a newer science, like semantics, how do you even get off the ground? Cruse here provides a marvelous exposition of the methods employed by semanticists, and some results obtainable from them. His intellectual honesty is such that he never claims more for them than what is warranted--he never tried to make too much stew from one oyster. There are vast

areas of semantics and linguistics which just can't be formalized. But Cruse here shows us how at least to get started. The approach he describes is one he calls a "contextual" approach--"the semantic properties of a lexical item are fully reflected in appropriate aspects of the relations it contracts with actual and potential contexts". Astute readers will note the perhaps surprising agreement here between Cruse and Quinian Holism. To get a grip on the meaning of a word, the best way is to systematically examining sentences which contain that word, and see if the sentences seem intuitively "wrong" somehow or "right". For example, it tells us something about the meaning of the word "light" that the sentence "It was too light for me to lift" seems wrong somehow. Certain readers might at first consider this intuition-based method to be hopelessly unscientific, but as Cruse points out, every measurement, at some point, depends upon human judgements--e.g. when measuring temperature, you have to judge which line on the thermometer is closest to the mercury. Indeed, that is what a measuring device does--makes quantities easier to make judgment calls about. A great insight. Cruse develops analogous "measuring instruments" to help with investigating what words mean.

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