
**Reviewed by Seth Mehl (University of Sheffield, UK)**

*English Historical Semantics* is published in the series of Edinburgh Textbooks on the English Language, intended for graduate students and advanced undergraduates. The book “is aimed at people who have some knowledge of the history of the English language, or of theoretical semantics, or both, and would like to study these topics in greater depth” (p. 1). The book is largely driven by a wise balance between the theoretical approaches of structuralism and Cognitive Linguistics (CL), linking those approaches to the practical methods of lexicography and corpus linguistics. Indeed, while the focus of the book is word meaning and meaning change in English, that subject is repeatedly and explicitly linked to pragmatics, discourse analysis, corpus linguistics, sociolinguistics, lexicography and etymology.

The book is divided into ten chapters, most containing a practical introduction and conclusion, all with exercises and suggested further reading. Key terms are introduced in bold print, referring to a glossary, and are also quite often accompanied by a parenthetical reference to later discussions (which is extremely helpful given the web of inter-dependent key terms in historical semantics). For example, *prototypicality* is briefly introduced in bold in Chapter 2, with a parenthetical reference to the fuller discussion in Chapter 3, and an associated glossary entry that includes a short, accessible discussion with multiple examples and perspectives on *prototypicality*.

Chapter 1 provides a short “Introduction” that defines the book’s audience, topic and theoretical approaches, and outlines subsequent chapters. The key terms *semasiology* and *onomasiology* are defined with reference to Geeraerts (2010), who popularised those terms in English. This is a wise pedagogical and theoretical choice, as the terms are essential for semantic study that links structuralism, CL and lexicography. Instructors seeking a pedagogical tool aligned with Geeraerts’ excellent monograph *Theories of Lexical Semantics* (2010) will particularly appreciate this presentation, and the book as a whole.

Chapter 2, “A History of the Lexicon”, presents a concise summary of the English lexicon across the centuries, including semantic and formal features. An onomasiological approach is demonstrated first through the conceptual domain
Merry in the *Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary* (HTOED), a step that may subvert students’ common intuitions that historical semantics is semasiological. Details of standard historical periods are presented within a social context, including, for example, the “sociolinguistic complexity” of the Norman invasion and its consequences (p. 10). Kay and Allan remind readers that “the purpose of language, after all, is to enable us to communicate with each other” (p. 22), and that language history must, therefore, incorporate real contexts of use; this emphasis on language contextualised by motivation and use facilitates an effective synthesis of sociolinguistics, CL and corpus linguistics. Among examples of texts from each period is Wilson’s *The Arte of Rhetorique* (1553), with an explanation of both *outlandish* and *oversea* (meaning “foreign”). Such examples offer immersion in the subject for students, while forwarding the HTOED and Oxford English Dictionary (OED) as valuable resources.

Chapter 3, entitled “Categories of Meaning”, describes the nature of categories in the mind, based on CL research, and links these to structuralist terminology. The recognition of these links is, unfortunately, rare even in academic literature, and is therefore particularly valuable in a textbook. The authors underline the fact that traditional terms from structuralist semantics remain useful: “reference”, “sense”, “denotation”, “connotation”, “monosemy” and “polysemy” are all defined here and employed throughout the book. Additional theoretical underpinnings are laid out, including *encyclopaedic knowledge* and *prototypicality*. Examples build from the relatively concrete *purple* and *ginger/ juice* to the more abstract *sensible*.

Having impressed upon students the importance of onomasiology, Chapter 4 moves on to semasiology, as per its title, “Tracing the Development of Individual Words”. Principles from previous chapters are now applied to specific word data from the OED. A history of the OED is provided, along with a thorough illustration of its use in historical semantic research. Even for students who have used the OED before, the thoroughness here renders it a valuable reference. Examples move from the simple *manga* to the much more complex *monster*. In a signature voice, Kay and Allan assert that with *monster*, it may be that “identification of the earliest use is neither particularly important nor particularly interesting… The order in which they are evidenced is perhaps not much more than an accident of history” (p. 61). This is a sophisticated point, tidily presented, and accessible to keen undergraduates. Indeed, one of the great accomplishments of the book is its presentation of sophisticated and complex subject matter in an accessible, even friendly, discussion. That pedagogical voice is one that students will appreciate.

Chapter 5, “How and Why Words Change Meaning”, includes patterns of change and “the most interesting question of all: why do words change meaning?” (p. 70). This is in line with the CL perspective of motivated meaning change. Kay and Allan present examples *literally* and *gay* in a nuanced way, with clear
consideration of complex social, cultural, historical and pragmatic factors, acknowledging that “meaning and meaning change can be a highly emotive issue when it relates to social and cultural change” (p. 72). Traditional types of semantic change are defined: “narrowing”, “widening”, “amelioration”, “pejoration”, “metaphor”, “metonymy” and “grammaticalisation”. This might be considered late in a discussion of historical semantics for introducing terms that have traditionally constituted a starting point, but the book’s arrangement is a sensible development from the authors’ theoretical frameworks. The book moves effectively from the primary step of meaning in the mind, through cognitive categorisation, through a modelling of onomasiological analysis based on cognitive categories in the mind, to semasiological analyses, and to the types of semantic change that can be observed in historical data. The discussion also includes the relatively advanced topics of invited inferencing and bridging contexts. “Subjectivization” as a trend in semantic change, however, is not discussed here. Traugott and Dasher (2002) present this trend in relation to *must*, and their coverage would be a nice supplement to classroom discussions of Chapter 5, as students often find subjectivization exciting, if challenging.

Chapter 6, “Larger Categories”, presents a thorough history of the HTOED, which is particularly engaging given that both authors contributed to that project. “Larger categories” refers to broader or higher-level cognitive categories, as might be represented in the upper layers of a thesaurus hierarchy. Structuralist terms including “synonymy”, “hyponymy”, “meronymy” and “antonymy” are employed alongside CL terms such as “basic level category”, and CL issues such as the differences between expert taxonomies and folk taxonomies. The intellectually agile movement between structuralist terminology, Cognitive Linguistics and lexicography is deftly executed: for example, a discussion of *sofa* builds on HTOED and OED evidence to consider *sofa* as a basic level category, and even includes a brief componential analysis, illustrating the value in connecting these theoretical frameworks and subdisciplines. It may be that students would benefit from some supplementary reference here to distributional semantics, the process of analysing semantic relations between words computationally, using corpora. In particular, “synonymy” in distributional semantics is often viewed as a general relatedness between words, such that even traditionally identified antonyms can be called synonyms (“related words”) in distributional semantics. Instructors might assign portions of Glynn and Robinson (2014) for further classroom work on that topic.

Chapter 7, entitled “English Colour Terms: A Case Study”, is written by Carol Biggam. The chapter is well-placed, and it addresses complex questions with both onomasiological and semasiological approaches. Biggam states that “not only have the words used for colours often changed over the centuries, but so has the way in which English speakers have used those words” (p. 113). Biggam argues for the
linguistic importance of Basic Colour Terms and the evolutionary sequence of colour terms. Basic Colour Terms in Old English and Middle English are listed and described, using text evidence, which constitutes a useful reference. The example of *brun* in particular is explored in depth, and Biggam’s innovative analysis is explained. It might have been interesting to include a quick discussion of colour terms in relation to the development of Prototype Theory, but interested students or instructors can find that in Rosch’s (1973) work on the subject.

Chapter 8 connects cognitive categories to sociolinguistics in a discussion of language and culture that encompasses Sapir and Whorf, “linguistic determinism” and “linguistic relativity”. Examples of words whose semantics reflect their cultural contexts include *left-handed* and *right-handed*, pronouns of address and kinship terms. On this final subject, the *Dictionary of the Scots Language* is compared to the *OED*, including terms such as *britherdochter* in Scots for a brother’s daughter. This may inspire some students to look further into lexical semantics not only in Scots but also in World Englishes; lexical semantics is not a prominent focus of World Englishes research, and it might be hoped that this book could stimulate such work by advanced students.

In Chapter 9, metaphor and metonymy undergo close inspection as “triggers of semantic change and polysemy” (p. 150). “Metaphor” and “metonymy” are defined in a literary sense and then a linguistic sense, and Lakoff and Johnson (1980) are cited at the outset, situating the discussion within CL. The terms “dormant metaphor”, “conventionalised metaphor” and “historical metaphor” are presented along with debates about dead metaphors, and about whether conventionalised metaphors eventually become literal. The discussion includes the fascinating point that literal or concrete meanings of *in* and *have* may not be historically prior. The authors assert, interestingly, that the difference between synchronically literal and metaphorical status is a terminological one, and wisely acknowledge that such debates will not be settled easily. That said, it might have been helpful to offer an exercise related to those debates at the end of the chapter, as a step to further discussion.

Chapter 10, entitled “The Big Picture and a Look Ahead”, sums up the ideas and techniques of the book with the example word *green*. It is an excellent summary that includes the *OED* and three other dictionaries as well as onomasiological change, polysemy and metaphor, cultural impact and grammar.

To summarize, the general strengths of the book include its sensible combination of CL, structuralist terminology and lexicographic practice, as well as the innovative pedagogical progression from meaning in the mind, to meaning in words, to evidence for onomasiological and semasiological change in English. As is certainly necessary in a semantics textbook, the authors regularly critique their own methods and identify limitations, suggesting a stance most semanticists
would support – that no technique is perfect, but that complementary approaches offer something more complete than any one technique alone.

Crucially for a textbook, *English Historical Semantics* mixes concise, direct clarity with engaging turns of phrase that convey a personal voice. There is no shortage of quotable lines such as: “Nothing reveals the deficiencies of a language more surely than translating into it” (p. 14) and “the condition [of being half-dead] may seem impossible, but the expression nevertheless exists” (p. 33). This is not just a collection of clever turns of phrase: it is the voice of experienced teachers working to engage students using stimulating language.

*English Historical Semantics* fills an obvious gap in the literature – there is no comparable advanced textbook on the subject – and it can be recommended strongly for advanced students of semantics and pragmatics, lexicology and lexicography, and Cognitive Linguistics.

**References**


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**Reviewer’s address**

Seth Mehl
School of English
Jessop West
1 Upper Hanover Street, Sheffield, S3 7RA
United Kingdom

s.mehl@sheffield.ac.uk

**Biographical notes**

Seth Mehl is a Research Assistant at the University of Sheffield. His ongoing research engages primarily with corpus semantics, and he is currently working with the Linguistic DNA project to investigate semantic and conceptual history in Early Modern English. He holds a PhD in English from University College London, is a council member of the Philological Society, and a member of the Keywords Project.