

# Preface

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**The Semantic Structure of Spanish: Meaning and grammatical form**

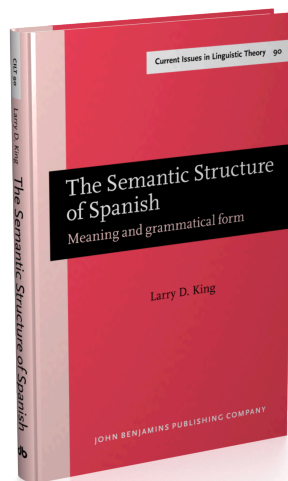
**Larry D. King**

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## Preface

Language exists for the expression of *meaning* by an encoder, and the understanding of that *meaning* by a decoder. The mode of expression may vary (a writer as opposed to a speaker, or a reader in lieu of a hearer, for instance), but the fact remains that language is directly tied to the ability of speakers to communicate messages through the interchange of meaning. Nevertheless, semantics, the branch of linguistics and related disciplines that purports to study this basic aspect of language, has never found itself bound by common goals and procedures of investigation. To the contrary, contemporary linguistic theory, more often than not, has explicitly denied a place for semantics within an integrated theory of language. Speaking for American structuralists, Bloomfield (1933:139) denies the accessibility of meaning by stating that "in order to give a scientifically accurate definition of meaning for every form of language, we should have to have a scientifically accurate knowledge of everything in the speaker's world". Generative-transformational grammar has developed from an equally negative attitude toward meaning. Chomsky (1957:17) concluded that "grammar is autonomous and independent of meaning". But in recent years, linguistics has become increasingly more willing to allow some type of representation of 'meaning' in the study of language. The Revised Extended Standard Theory of generativists, for example, incorporates a level of 'logical form', which, as explained by Chomsky & Lasnik (1977:428), includes meaning "strictly determined by sentence grammar, not involving situational context, background beliefs, speaker's intentions, etc." Model-theoretic semantics, as based on the work of Richard Montague and developed by Partee (1976) and others, seeks to establish a truth-condition logic for sentences of natural language. And progress has been made toward a more structured account of the pragmatics of language use as evidenced by the work of Grice (1975) and others.

But all of these approaches to semantics deal with sentence or utterance meaning, and thereby ignore a rather basic problem for semantic analysis: the meaning of the linguistic form. And yet it is clear that no description of linguistic

semantics can be complete without a comprehensive account of the correspondence between meaning and form.

In this study I want to return to the problem of the linguistic form and its meaning by reconsidering certain issues pertinent to semantic analysis. This goal will require us to reevaluate traditional approaches and to take into account more recent models in order to show that the problem of meaning and form in language does not have to be the stepchild of linguistic inquiry. We will suggest that not all linguistic forms represent the same type of 'meaning', and that a subset of grammatical forms constitute a highly organized system that parallels phonology and syntax in its capacity to explain variation at the level of discourse. Specifically, we will identify seven semantic notions for Spanish that are defined on the basis of speaker viewpoint (perspective) on real world phenomena, and for each semantic notion we will delineate features that represent invariant meanings. We will suggest that the meanings of all finite verb forms in Spanish consist of a feature of invariant meaning of each of four semantic notions (tense, orientation, aspect, and mood), and that these meanings allow for any number of pragmatic implication/inference relationships in discourse. In a similar fashion, it will be argued that the semantic notions of partitivity, deixis, and status, and the invariant meanings based on speaker perspective associated with each of these semantic notions, account for the meaning of several constituents of the noun phrase. In every case we will attempt to show that these invariant meanings serve as an organizing principle that succinctly accounts for what appears to be unwieldy variation in the meaning of a form in actual language use.

The failure to achieve an adequate model for the description of the correspondence between form and meaning is attributable largely to a constant preoccupation with the equating of all meaning with aspects of the real world, and with beliefs and feelings that speakers have about that world. In arriving at this conclusion, I have taken a small clue from the mathematician Benoît Mandelbrot (1977,1983), whose theory of fractal geometry is based on the assumption that there is order in messiness. I hope to show that certain aspects of linguistic meaning are not nearly as complicated as we might be led to believe, and that despite the apparent messiness of the use of a grammatical form in varying contexts, there is nevertheless a great deal of order underlying its occurrence.

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