

Michael Stubbs. **Words and Phrases: Corpus Studies in Lexical Semantics**. 2001. Oxford: Blackwell. Pp. xix, 267.

This book deals with the most neglected aspect of current modern linguistics, in my view, viz. lexis – words and their connotations, incorporating traditional lexical semantics, including lexical fields, sense relations, and collocations. Stubbs, Professor of English Linguistics at the University of Trier, has published three previous volumes with the same publisher: Discourse Analysis (1983), Educational Linguistics (1986), and Text and Corpus Analysis (1996). In the same vein as his previous work, this new treatise deals with nontheoretical linguistics as practiced in the Chomskyan framework, and is unquestionably an interesting and significant contribution to contemporary linguistics (see further below).

Native speaker overall communicative competence in terms of words and their meanings and uses is nothing short of miraculous. As the author points out, if an English speaker hears the word furlong, the context in which it occurs is probably horse racing (p. 7). Similarly, a warm front makes one immediately think of a weather report or forecast (*ibid.*). Just as native speakers have a Sprachgefühl as it relates to syntax and grammatical vs. ungrammatical sentences, so too they have knowledge about words and their connotations, denotations, and collocations. Although, e.g., both males and females engage in gossip, the word itself is culturally marked for femininity as well as for disapproval as the reaction to it (pp. 7-8). Native speakers just know that it is a putdown to say: “Look at Mary over there. What a gossip she is!” And there is something awkward about: “Look at John over there. \*What a gossip he is!” Although men certainly do engage in gossip, we just do not call it this.

Ambiguity, usually a major topic in syntactic theory, is also very important in lexical semantics, and the author explains, e.g., how ambiguous the term surgery is, proving that the field

is a fascinating one (pp. 13-14). Thus, in German this word may be translated four different ways: (1) Operation; (2) Chirurgie; (3) Praxis; (4) Sprechstunde (p. 14). On the other hand, a word such as bank, although it has two entirely different senses (money vs. ground), is referred to as nonambiguous when context is taken into consideration, which native speakers always do. In this connection, the author remarks: “So, in isolation the word is ambiguous, but this statement depends on a very artificial assumption, since the word never occurs in isolation” (p. 15). Quite so! The conclusion? “... the two senses occurred in complementary distribution, either in one lexical context or the other, not both” (ibid.).

One of the most interesting topics in this volume is the idea of delexicalization (pp. 32-34). In a search of the lemma take a in a corpus of over two million words, only in about 10% of those did take have its literal meaning. The most common use was the delexicalized (he states that the term desemantized is more logical [p. 32]) meaning, such as take a photograph. (The exemplary verb take a decision [ibid.] does not occur in my dialect.) He asserts that most of the meaning is in the noun. I believe a synchronic and diachronic investigation of delexicalization from a typological perspective is a desideratum and would make absorbing reading. As part of this study, one would seek to know why in English one can take a look and have a look without any difference in meaning. Thus, if a child cuts himself or herself, Mommy can say: “Let’s have/take a look at it.” Similarly, take/have a taste is perfectly OK, but not take/have a listen/feel/smell – only the latter verb works.

Some of the topics one might expect to see covered in a book such as this are, in fact, present, such as synonyms, antonyms and hyponyms, word frequency, core vocabulary, language in its cultural contexts and the etymological fallacy, language change, words and stereotypes, German loanwords in English, etc. All of this makes for exciting reading and stimulating

opportunities for teaching, to be sure. However, mainstream modern Chomskyan linguistics, I hasten to reiterate, is totally unconcerned with this subject matter, thoroughly convinced (sadly) that it has no theoretical value. What a great pity! The author convincingly demonstrates that one can escape from the Saussurean paradox (pp. 231-232) by resorting to corpus linguistics. As Stubbs so aptly puts it: “Words have a tendency to co-occur with certain other words, and culturally and communicatively competent native speakers of English are aware of such probabilities and of the cultural frames which they trigger” (p. 17).

ALAN S. KAYE  
*California State University, Fullerton*