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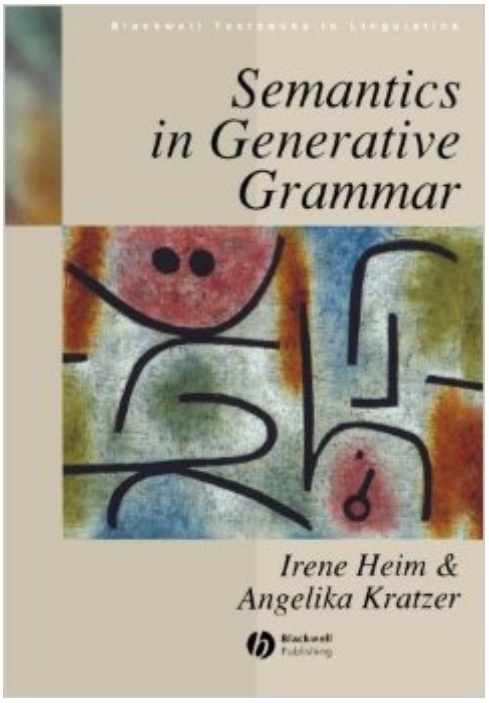

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Synopsis

Written by two of the leading figures in the field, this is a lucid and systematic introduction to formal semantics.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

If you’re thinking of studying formal semantics seriously, of course you should read this book. There’s no better place to start, and it’s what everyone else will expect you to have read. It helps that the pacing and prose are impeccable.But you don’t need me to tell you this, so let me answer some other questions. Should you read this if you’re a philosopher with a side-interest in semantics? If the interest is serious, see above. If it’s casual, then the answer is still yes. H&K are brilliant philosophical thinkers in their own right, and they helpfully explain their project against a background of Fregean philosophy of language. There are also discussions that draw from philosophers in surprising ways; I didn’t expect such a meaty quotation from Quine in the chapter on relative clauses!You’re also going to want to know about sets, lambdas, and natural language quantifiers, which H&K will teach you in no time. Less helpful, but equally delightful, is the excursus on predicate logic.There are a few unsatisfying things about this book’s project, which is to make mathy languages that look like natural languages and show how sentences get their meanings from words. How is a semantic theory supposed to hook up to a theory of psychology? How are the basic elements of a semantic theory of Englishâ ”e.g., "dog"â ”realized in an Anglophone’s brain? Do we even know what the prospects are for answering these questions?These are big, hard questions that no one knows how to answer (or so say my friendly neighborhood cognitive scientists). One

can’t fault H&K for failing to settle them in an intro book!

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