Emma Borg & Sarah A. Fisher. *Meaning: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press 2025. 144 pp. $12.99 USD (Paperback 9780192866547).

Emma Borg and Sarah Fisher walk readers through the battlegrounds of contemporary theories of meaning (especially linguistic meaning). They bring to life the ideas animating the theories and propelling the debates. Without bogging down in jargon or theoretical detail, they deftly explain in a mere 144 pages the philosophical significance and (dis)advantages of the various moves made. For a book aimed at students and non-philosophers, they strike an ideal balance between intuitive colour and philosophical depth.

The book's contents are divided thematically into three main sub-issues, though Borg and Fisher move among the three across the various chapters. They lay out a "wish list" for any adequate theory of meaning: (a) that it explain both what meaning is (i.e., "semantics") and where linguistic meaning comes from metaphysically speaking (i.e., "metasemantics"); (b) that it capture how the meanings of complex expressions (e.g., phrases and sentences) are built out of simpler parts (e.g., words) according to a finite set of rules; and (c) that it explain how standing meanings—roughly, what an expression type conventionally means in the shared tongue—relate to context-bound speakers' meanings (20-21). The second sub-issue concerns philosophical semantics, specifically the three *types* of theoretical answers to (a)-(c) which both dominated 20th century philosophy of language and remain plausible candidates today: reference-based theories of meaning (chs. 3-4); mind-based theories (chs. 5-6); and usage-based ones (ch. 7). Finally, the book brilliantly presents the "applied turn" (22) that many philosophers of language have recently taken, to consider how philosophical theories of meaning support solutions to social problems regarding speech, e.g., the differences between lying and misleading; whether slurs or offensive terms can be "reclaimed"; how best to counter propaganda; or how to settle the problem of contested terms in the law in a consistent and principled way (36).

There are many positives about the text. It's clear as day. We particularly admire the terrific coverage of the sub-species within meaning-theories. Borg and Fisher explain the simple, direct version of reference-theory (which arguably works best for indexicals/demonstratives and ordinary proper names like 'Donald Trump') but also contrast it with more involved, Frege-style, attempts to capture the meaning of empty names (e.g., 'Santa Claus') and co-referring but seemingly non-synonymous names ('Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus'). Similarly, they contrast the two major sub-

varieties of mentalistic theories: the one which has sound-patterns corresponding to ideas in the mind (à la Fodor's Mentalese) and the one which connects such sound-patterns with communicative intentions (à la Grice in his "Meaning"). Turning to meaning-as-use, the later Wittgenstein is their main exemplar, and they spend almost five pages describing his concept of utterances as moves within a language game; but J. L. Austin's more systematic speech-act-theoretic sub-species gets a mention too.

The authors also effectively lay out the choice points for language theorists as they navigate the many options about meanings. For instance, and to put the point in our preferred terms, a meaning-theorist may emphasize 'creativity' either in the sense of *algorithmic rules that generate an unlimited number of meaningful sentences* (*cf.* productivity and systematicity) or in the sense of *cleverness/wit in context* (*cf.* conversational implicatures or metaphor). Crucially, it is difficult to capture both kinds of "creative language use" in any single theory: the convention-oriented theorist emphasizes the former, while the more domain-general pragmatics-oriented theorist emphasizes the latter. Or again, the meaning-theorist can either capture the relationship between our talk and our world, albeit leaving out a host of problematic terms ('unicorn', 'Sherlocke Holmes', 'hello'); or they can place meaning squarely in the mind, thereby risking detaching language from anything real. Truth-conditional semanticists tend to opt for the former, while mentalistic folks like Chomsky and Jackendoff fall prey to the latter temptation. In short, Borg and Fisher drive home that linguists and philosophers often find themselves stuck within some nasty dilemmas with no obvious way out; readers, they urge, must reflect on those dilemmas on their own.

Unsurprisingly, there are negatives. The book really is a gem, but even gems have flaws. It might have been helpful to underscore more sharply the difference between the two questions in their wish list (a). Granted, a philosopher can give a similar answer to both "What does a linguistic expression mean?" and "In virtue of what does it mean that?": Wittgenstein not only thinks that meaning *derives* from use; he holds that to give the meaning *just is* to specify how an expression is used in various language games. The issues can come apart, however. Consider David Lewis. He's roughly a neo-Fregean about semantics: simplifying, a general term like 'pencil' has as its meaning a function from possible worlds to sets of things. Nonetheless, Lewis is a use theorist when it comes to metasemantics. For him, */pen.sl/* means that one specific function because of how a certain group of people, English speakers, when cooperatively interacting, tacitly agree to deploy a sound-pattern. Conventions *arise* from community use for Lewis (and meaning arises from

conventions); nonetheless, to give the meaning is not simply to describe the speech acts one might make with an expression.

To their credit, Borg and Fisher introduce pluralism about semantics, the idea that all three theories get something right. But it comes up only very briefly at the end, and they don't distinguish two flavours of semantic pluralism. A modest variant says only that there are expressions which have reference as their meaning, expressions which express mental states, and expressions which merely have use-conditions. Consider, respectively, 'Donald Trump'/'London', 'ouch'/'yippee' and 'hello'/'amen'. A more robust pluralism—one which we ourselves incline towards—says that a single linguistic expression can exhibit meanings of all three kinds. Consider 'Did you buy another fucking boat?'. The sentence invokes worldly satisfiers (it pertains to purchasing and boats); 'fucking' expresses anger with respect to the fact being queried; and, being in the interrogative mood, this English sentence has the speech-function of asking.

We would also have liked to see more of a narrative structure, tying the compelling parts together into a compelling whole. Borg and Fisher emphasize accessible and memorable thought experiments, and that makes sense given the audience. Still, it creates some lacunae. It would have helped, for instance, to explicitly revisit each of their wish list's (a)-(c) when evaluating the three major meaning theories and their subvarieties. Or again, they could have spilled more ink on how the contrasting meaning theories interconnect with the applied issues: for instance, the reference-and-truth crowd seem committed to a difference in the properties expressed by slurring terms versus their neutral counterparts. To pick a tame example, 'British' and 'Limey' would encode different properties. Surely that's implausible: what exactly might their propositional difference consist in? In contrast, the mentalistic theorist can contrast the emotions that go along with slurring words: the user of 'Limey', e.g., emotes in a specific way. And the use theorist can simply say that 'Limey' functions as impolite derogatory slang, so that it's apt for use in different circumstances than 'British person' is.

Next, insofar as there is a narrative, readers can easily get the misimpression that the contemporary debate unfolded *historically* along the topical/thematic lines Borg and Fisher have sketched in the book, because they use the problems they have identified with the previous theory of meaning to introduce the subsequent theory. We experts can recognize that they are following the logical order of the ideas, rather than a chronological ordering, because we know how these debates unfolded. However, for new initiates who are likely lacking this knowledge, the transitions

between the theories of meaning might mislead.

A final quibble. In concluding the book, Borg and Fisher are very even-handed. Perhaps frustratingly so! They do not give readers any real sense of which theory ought to be preferred, or whether some version of a multi-pronged approach is most viable. We fear that some readers new to philosophy (for whom this book is intended) won't relish the aporia Borg and Fisher end with.

Regarding all of the above, one must register two points in the authors' defense. The book genuinely is a very short introduction. Borg and Fisher have been forced into tough choices in the face of tough constraints. Even a lengthy introduction which tried to get all the details of philosophy of language exactly right would *ipso facto* be a failure. What's more, when readers are guided by an instructor, all of this seems like less of a problem: lectures can easily differentiate semantics from metasemantics, tie the elements of the book into a clearer narrative, and clarify who wrote what when. Equally, an instructor can push students to plump for one theory over others, or to endorse some sort of semantic pluralism. So, though it may sound like we have numerous complaints, one might best read this review as offering tips for how to teach from this text – something that you really ought to do.

In sum, both of us are massively impressed by Borg and Fisher's accomplishment. *Meaning: A Very Short Introduction* is a terrifically useful contribution. We both intend to use it in our upcoming undergraduate courses in Fall 2025. (A sophomore-level one introduces philosophy of language with reference to applied issues. Another, a more advanced class, surveys philosophy of language through its pre-history from the Greeks forward.) We strongly encourage our colleagues to use it in their own courses as well.

Benjamin Hill & Robert J. Stainton, University of Western Ontario