“Semantics and Pragmatics” is first of all a handbook. Its origins are in the homonymous course that professor Jaszczolt has been giving in the last few years at the University of Cambridge. Its major goal is to provide a unitary explanation of what meaning is, more precisely the author wants to provide a unitary account of meaning in language, in the mind and in discourse. Semantics and Pragmatics are therefore seen as two complementary disciplines dealing with meaning from different perspectives.

Jaszczolt’s approach is primarily objectivist, assuming the notion of truth as corresponding with reality, but it integrates to various degrees various proposals pertaining to different traditions of research such as cognitive semantics.

In his book, he presents the most outstanding questions in semantics as well as the dominant theories and approaches to these issues comparing them in a “problems and possible solutions” style of presentation.

The first chapter, “Word meaning, sentence meaning, speaker meaning”, introduces the reader with the fundamental concepts and distinctions in the domain of meaning. First, the author explains that while semantics deals with the meaning of words and sentences, focusing on linguistic expressions, pragmatics pertains to meaning of utterances, taking the interlocutors as the focus of attention. The notions of proposition, sentence and utterance are defined and several theories of meaning are presented in their attempts to solve the important question of what meaning is. None of them (referential theory, mentalist theory, use theory and truth-conditional theory) is discarded, they are viewed as interconnected.

Jaszczolt moves then on to word meaning, introducing the reader with the major proposals. The “meaning-as-definition approach” is refuted because of the infinite regress or the circularity it implies and because it doesn’t seem to say anything about the source of these definitions, neglecting also the problem of the boundaries between linguistic and encyclopaedic knowledge. He also criticizes the division between literal, conventional, context-independent and context-dependent aspects of meaning, claiming that it amounts to a mere redefining of the problem rather than solving it. This explains why logicians created metalanguages, i.e. artificial languages, to describe natural languages avoiding ambiguity.

After quickly mentioning the “meaning-as-concepts approach”, he contrasts the “meaning-as-reference approach”, according to which the meaning of a world is derived from the way it describes the world, with the structuralist approach, the main claim of which is that part of the meaning is derived from the relation the words enter into among themselves in the language system. This also gives the author the opportunity to introduce the notions of sense, the relation between words, and reference, the relation between words and the world. He then distinguishes sense_1 from sense_2: this latter refers to the way the notion is used in the approach that Jazczolt is more familiar with, truth-conditional semantics, where it “is understood as the way the speaker thinks about the object, that is a guise under which the object is known to the speaker. In other words, sense is a mode of presentation, a way of givenness, a thought, an idea in the mind”, it is “speaker-relative”(p.6-7). He proposes an approach which combines meaning as reference and sense_2, a solution which, he claims, would include both word meaning and sentence meaning.

He explains better the notion of reference and contrasts it with denotation, introducing the notion of the expression’s extension. He also presents the philosophical question of definite
descriptions, and of the possibility of using them referentially or attributively, which is a source of ambiguity. The problem of intensional contexts and of non-substitutivity are quickly addressed.

After this overview of the problems connected with word meaning, the author turns to paradigmatic lexical relations, constituting the core of the structuralist approach, like the relations of inclusion, sameness, and opposition. The relation of inclusion gives him the occasion to introduce some fundamental notions in logic, such as entailment, as well as some lexical relations such as hyponymy and meronymy, member-collection relation and portion-mass relation, which are further analysed in their being transitive or optional. Synonymy is presented as a relation based on sameness and existing in degrees and only according to the approach which is adopted. The discussion about synonymy brings about also the questions of ambiguity and vagueness and of homonymy and polysemy: words featuring these qualities need be disambiguated in context. The relation of opposition is defined as the relation between words opposite in meaning and several kind of antonyms are distinguished, such as contradictories, contraries, converses, etc.

The holistic structuralistic approach is then compared to various atomistic componential analysis. After presenting several examples of lexical decomposition, Jazczolt introduces the major models developed within this approach. First, attention is devoted to Carnap’s meaning postulates, helping determine the reference of the object and said to correspond to the speaker’s knowledge. What is different from the structuralist approach is that componential models assume that words have meaning in isolation and not as a part of the system. Such meanings would be logically and psychologically independent from one another. The problem with Carnap’s model is individuated in its psychological plausibility. Structuralism seems to better account for the organization of the mental lexicon, also in cosideration of the lack of empirical support for the atomist model. Some further development within the componential framework are described, such as the generative approach by Katz and Postal (1964), who built a model based on semantic markers (general semantic properties), distinguishers (more specific semantic components) and selectional restrictions (rules specifying which items collocate well and which do not).

This approach, bringing semantics and syntax in contact, is shown to have opened the way for researches on thematic roles, of which a list is provided. Talmy’s cognitive approach to the syntax-semantics interface is also presented and the overview of componential analyses is closed with a quick description of Jackendoff’s conceptual semantics and Wierzbicka’s semantic primes.

All these approaches are shown to present several problems, first of all, the uncertain nature of the categories used in the descriptions.

The last approach to lexical meaning presented in this very rich first chapter is Pustejovsky’s generative lexicon, founded on the standard assumption that much structural information about a sentence is encoded in the lexicon. In this approach pragmatics and semantics interact since world knowledge is considered indispensable for drawing inferences. This is one of the approaches where, in order to capture the functioning of the selection from among meaning alternatives, a set of rules based on contextual and encyclopaedic knowledge are proposed. An other example of such an approach is Blutner’s lexical pragmatics.

The second chapter, “Concepts”, deals with one of the most controversial notions in linguistics and in philosophy of language, although the central one in representational approaches to meaning.

The author starts posing some fundamental questions such as: what are representations and how do they work? Are meaning as mental representation and meaning as reference compatible? What information do concepts contain?

In order to answer to the first question, several representational approaches (the imagist, the structuralist and the atomistic) are compared and contrasted with externalism: the author’s conclusion seem to be that meanings are not in the head, but in the world.

The author presents then the possibility of merging representational and referential approaches to meaning, including truth-conditional and cognitive, as a very promising eclectic direction in semantics.
As to what concepts are constituted by, both the images and the necessary and sufficient semantic features hypothesis are ruled out. The major problem with concepts seems to be boundary fuzziness, and some non-compositional theories which tried to account for that are commented on, such as Rosh and Labov’s Prototype Theory, Wittgenstein’s family resemblances, Lakoff’s Idealized Cognitive Models, Fillmore’s Frame Theory, Johnson-Laird’s Mental Models and Fauconnier’s Mental Spaces. Non-compositionality is indicated as the major problem with these theories, since in Jaszczolt’s view any successful theory of meaning need be compositional, therefore concepts cannot be prototypes (p.37). In line with Fodor’s view, concepts are better thought of as productive and systematic compositional constituents of thoughts. But what is the relation between thought, language and concepts? Concepts are clearly defined as constituent parts of propositions, and together, concepts and propositions are the units of thought (p.38). Not all concepts have corresponding words. They are not ideas, since these latter belong to individuals, whereas concepts can be shared. They are types rather then tokens and belong to the language system. They can be derived from experience or be innate. Nothing is said about their classification or origins, since these are contentious matters.

As far as the relationship between thought and language, the second is in ultimate analysis considered to be dependent on the first. Two opposite views are presented: linguistic relativity and linguistic universalism. They differ with respect to the fundamental question of whether concepts are universal or not. The first theory claims that thinking and the perception of the world is determined by the language we speak, and its major representatives are Whorf and Sapir. Within this framework, meaning can only be approached through a system of language which delimits particular concepts. The second theory claims, on the other hand, that humans categorise the world through concepts, which are lexicalized differently in different languages. The major representatives of this trend are Talmy, Kay and in general all the cognitive linguists. Through this comparison, the author arrives at proposing an approach in which both relativity and universalism (in various degrees) could be integrated, although primacy is granted to the hypothesis that thought determines language. This brings about another problem. If the structure and the operations of the brain actually determine language, there must be a uniform “language” used in computations. The next question concerns, thus, the nature of such a “language”, and the author tries to answer it comparing Fodor’s language of thought hypothesis (mentalese) and his theory of modularity of the mind with the contrasting opinion of people like Cohen or Carruthers who claim that although there is no strong evidence against Mentalese, the language of thought is anyway better conceived as resembling natural language.

In the very few lines of the chapter the author makes clear his position, that is, he states his preference for a propositional-based approach to meaning “in the form of truth-conditional semantics, supplemented with a pragmatic theory compatible with it” and in which “concepts have to have their rightful place” (p.51).

Chapter 3, “Sentence meaning”, introduces the reader with the main concepts of truth-conditional semantics, which is the approach that the author overtly supports throughout the book and which is defined as “the most successful theory of sentence meaning”.

Jaszczolt proposes an eclectic truth-conditional model. Within this theory, sentences are about the world and meaning follows from the notion of truth, which is taken to mean correspondence with facts (correspondence theory of truth). Knowing what a sentence means, equals knowing under what conditions it would be true.

The author underlines how, although being a referential approach, truth-conditional semantics, as he interprets it, is an idealization, and therefore there are many sentences for which the denotational approach doesn’t work, and the only possibility is to resort to mental representations and contextual clues.

In the remaining sections of the chapter, the reader is introduced to several fundamental notions pertaining to this domain of research such as analytic and synthetic truth, deductive,
propositional and predicate logic, i.e., the main procedures for providing truth conditions on which the meaning of a sentence is founded, as well as the logical form, an unambiguous conceptual representation which allows truth conditions to be made clear automatically. The role of the principle of compositionality in truth conditional semantics is explained and some limitations of this approach are acknowledged, such as the lack for an adequate account of word meaning, the inability to account for non-declarative sentences and the problems created by such constructions as propositional attitude reports.

The theory of Possible Worlds and Montagues’s Model Theoretic Semantics, as well as some of its developments (Kamp & Reyle’s Discourse Representation Theory) are presented as an exemplification of applied truth-conditional semantics.

The author concludes the chapter stating his position in favour of an approach which has as a promising starting point truth-conditional semantics, to which “lexical semantics adds the compositionality of word meaning and pragmatics adds truth-conditionally relevant but context-dependent aspects of meaning and the formalization of non-declarative” (p.70).