Straight talk, bent meanings: semantics on the watershed

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Linguistics is sometimes characterised as the most scientific of the humanities, and the most humanistic of the sciences. As the etymology of proto-Germanic *skaithan* teaches us, this can give us both the bidirectional vista gained by sitting on a water*shed* and the (philological) discrimination and (typological) casting about of Old English *sceadan* but also the danger of *scheiden* - parting, separation, divorce. From a time when linguists like Jakobson were equally at home talking about typology, distinctive features and poetics, our field has seen an increasing parting of the ways between the humanistic approaches more characteristic of philology, such as fine-grained interpretations of texts or speech events, and the putatively more scientific approaches frequently associated with formal models of syntax or semantics, but also quantitative approaches to variation, corpus structure and acoustics. This scission can creates tensions and ambivalences in epistemology, in how the field is taught, in the fostering of research practices, and in how we write and where we publish our research.

In this paper I argue that it is possible to see these tensions as complementary rather than necessarily conflictual, and that linguistics can only fulfil its potential by combining both perspectives. Taking as my starting point the close reading of fragments of two oral texts in Dalabon, an Aboriginal language of northern Australia, I focus on two semantic problems that challenge close translation and that are prone to significant cross-linguistic variability: (a) perception verbs and tropes mapping them into the cognitive domain, (b) personal pronouns.

I examine two methods for understanding the meaning-structure of an unfamiliar language. First, the application of 'field philology' to arrive at a detailed understanding of what oral texts mean, which can only be done by maximising one's sensitivity to semantic nuance and cross-linguistic difference: this is what enables us to unveil 'the mutual secrets which people and epochs keep from each other and which contribute so much to their fragmentation and hostility' (Ortega y Gasset 1937, my translation). Second, the use of semantic typology, implemented though large databases, to systematise the patterns of semantic extension found in a particular language against the global patterning of the semantic design space, which can only be perceived by jettisoning some fine language-specific distinctions for the purposes of cross-linguistic calibration.

The real challenge for our field, then, is not the incompatibility of 'scientific' and 'humanities' approaches, but the need to obtain better definitions of how they interact and what each is good for. We need both if we are to fully understand both the outer bounds of the world's linguistic diversity and the patterns that order it.