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Wolfgang Teubert
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Meaning, Discourse and Society

Meaning, Discourse and Society investigates the construction of reality within discourse. When people talk about things such as language, the mind, globalisation or weeds, they are less discussing the outside world than objects they have created collaboratively by talking about them. Wolfgang Teubert shows that meaning cannot be found in mental concepts or neural activity, as implied by the cognitive sciences. He argues instead that meaning is negotiated and knowledge is created by symbolic interaction, thus taking language as a social, rather than a mental, phenomenon. Discourses, Teubert contends, can be viewed as collective minds, enabling the members of discourse communities to make sense of themselves and of the world around them. By taking an active stance in constructing the reality they share, people thus can take part in moulding the world in accordance with their perceived needs.

WOLFGANG TEUBERT is Professor of Corpus Linguistics at the University of Birmingham. His previous book publications include *Corpus Linguistics: A Short Introduction* (2007, with Anna Cermakova), *Text, Discourse and Corpora* (2007, with Michael Hoey, Michael Stubbs and Michaela Mahlberg) and he was co-editor of *Corpus Linguistics: Critical Concepts in Linguistics: A Reader* (2007) and *Text Corpora and Multilingual Lexicography* (2007).

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Acknowledgements

The impulse to write this book arose from the quandary of the nature of meaning which had bewildered me for many years. Only when I had moved away from the more navel-gazing disposition of my former research institution in Germany, where I used to look for meaning in the depths of solitary minds, and had been enveloped in a British university's spirit of sociability, did it begin to dawn on me that just as it is meaning that creates society, it is society that gives rise to meaning. Meaning emerges whenever people interact symbolically, negotiating the signs they use to communicate. As long as such interaction continues, meaning keeps evolving. Therefore there can never be a finite answer to the meaning of meaning. Meaning is only in the discourse, not in people's minds, and not in a reality out there. If we want to make sense of this discourse and the realities it has in stock for us, we do it not as monadic entities, but by working together, adding layer after layer of interpretation to all the previous layers of which the discourse consists. While such an approach is contrary to that of nativist linguistics, of the cognitive sciences and of the philosophy of mind, it is certainly not new or original. It draws on ideas developed in corpus linguistics and integrationist linguistics and on pragmatism, hermeneutics, social constructivism/constructionism and various brands of discourse studies, to name some key inspirations.

I would like to thank the University of Birmingham, its School of Humanities, and most of all my colleagues at the Department of English for the warm welcome they extended to me when I arrived here nine years ago. Without this stimulating atmosphere, the constant encouragement and the generous intellectual support I would never have ventured on this book project. As long as I continue to breathe this academic air, I will, I hope, keep changing and developing my outlook. In this sense the ideas presented here are more work in progress than a conclusive perspective.

Over this time I was given ample opportunity to present my ideas to my colleagues at Birmingham and many other places, and not only did they receive them with endless forbearance but they also opened my eyes to many aspects I had overlooked. I am equally grateful to my undergraduate students who engaged in often heated discussions with me, trying to instil a modicum of

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common sense into my ruminations. Many of the topics touched upon in this book have been introduced to me by my graduate students, among them Tony Bastow, Lisa Cheung, Angel Garralda, Nelya Koteyko, Fumiko Kondo, Maria Oset Garcia, Dominic Smith, Laura Strakova, Wang Fang and Wang Weiqun. Friends at a number of Chinese universities, Feng Zhiwei, Li Wenzhong, Pu Jianzhong and Wei Naixing, in particular, have repeatedly given me the opportunity to present my ideas and discuss them in remarkable depth with their students.

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