

**Martin Thiering, *Kognitive Semantik und kognitive Anthropologie. Eine Einführung*, De Gruyter, Berlin-Boston 2018.**

The book has several virtues. As trivial as it can seem, the first one is its coherence with what the title announces: the volume is actually a real introduction to the intertwined fields of cognitive semantics and anthropology. This means that the reader does not need to have any acquaintance with the matter and the problems the author deals with. Thiering leads the reader step by step into the fundamental issues of the disciplines, presenting the essential concepts involved, describing the core methodological insights and offering an overview of the leading scholars. Here a second virtue of the book arises: it offers even more than one could expect, providing a sort of basic anthology of relevant texts. It offers plenty of quotations and passages from both the essential bibliography and the public domain (newspapers, magazines, websites), allowing for a critical survey of the main theoretical positions and empirical evidences. This represents another significant feature of the book, that is the virtuous combination of methodological-theoretical issues and applied analyses. So, the reader can find thorough discussions of the philosophical underpinnings of language and cognition as well as detailed descriptions of typical experiments in cognitive science (like Shepard & Metzler's rotation test) or compared inter and intra-linguistic analyses (as, for instance, in paragraph 4.2. "*Topologische Relationen: Formal-logische*

*Beschreibungen*, pp. 146-150). This makes the volume not only a fundamental introductory tool for students, inexperienced readers or scholars coming from different (although often confining) disciplines, but also a reference work for people engaged in the field. This is also due to the wide range of disciplinary domains that are taken into account in the book, as the 21 pages of bibliography at the end of the volume clearly show: besides "obligatory" names like for instance those of Jackendoff, Levinson or Talmy, one can find less expectable names such as Kant, de Certeau, Foucault, or Wittgenstein.

Despite its richness and many-sidedness, this introduction to cognitive semantics and anthropology revolves around a well-defined and complex theoretical problem: the relationship among language, culture and cognition. More specifically, the question is whether cognitive patterns can have an influence on linguistic structures and vice versa and whether both depend, in turn, on specific cultural frameworks or are, on the contrary, culture-independent. In other words, what is at stake here is the classic problem concerning the existence of cognitive, linguistic and/or cultural universals. In facing this issue, however, Thiering does not pretend to adopt an alleged scientific neutrality (which would probably be impossible, anyway); on the contrary, he supports a precise theoretical view, which he does not take for granted but presents in a genuine critical, evaluative and epistemologically founded way. This theoretical view is the so-called *neo-whorfian theory*, otherwise labelled as *Linguistic relativism*, according to which cognition and language influence each other within specific cultural codifications. The critical defence of this thesis – whose limits and shortcomings are anyway brought to light by the author, who makes also reference to alternative theoretical frameworks – is also grounded in Thiering's fieldwork as a cognitive linguist close to the work of the Language and Cognition research group at the Max

Planck Institute for Psycholinguistic run from 1994 to 2017 by S. C. Levinson (see chapter 4, *Räumliche Referenzrahmen: die Forschungsergebnisse der Max-Planck-Gruppe in Nijmegen*, pp. 133-189). The reader can also find first-hand results taken from Thiering's own research on *First-nations languages* and on spatial cognition and spatial semantics (See chapter 4.7. *Wegbeschreibung: Intralinguale Unterschiede studentischer Erhebungen*, pp. 179-186), which the author also termed elsewhere *spatial phenomenology* (Blomberg, Thiering 2016). This is another key feature of the book: *space* is taken as a starting point as well as an emblematic case study to enlighten the relationship among language, culture and cognition. This choice does not depend only on Thiering's expertise and area of competence (his unpublished doctoral dissertation was on «*The Construction of Topological Spaces*», see also Thiering 2015 on Spatial Semiotics and Spatial Mental Models), but also on the fact that in cognitive science and especially in cognitive linguistics space occupies a theoretically privileged role as it is assumed «to be an especially important link between language and cognition» (Blomberg, Thiering 2016: 162). It is in this respect that probably the most original pages of the book are to be found: indeed Thiering combines a phenomenological-gestaltic approach (see chapter 7 *Gestalttheorie*, pp. 260-281), which is not unfamiliar to cognitive linguistics and cognitive semiotics (cf. for instance Sonesson 2012 and Zlatev 2009), with a post-structuralist stance. The product of this *unusual* marriage is the concept of *N-Räume* (N-spaces). N-spaces are to be understood as culture-specific constructions, which reveal themselves especially in linguistic, social and other cultural practices. Space is therefore understood not as something assumed as given (as an *a priori*, according to Kant), but as a pluralistic and polysemic concept. So, besides physical space, there are mental, linguistic, phenomenal,

historical, virtual, visual, auditive, colonial, utopic, museum and remembrance spaces (pp. 20-22). Every N-space is of course connected to a specific culture and to specific cognitive and linguistic codings (see for instance chapter 3.5, *Sprachbeispiele*, pp. 116-125). However, the pluralistic and polysemic concept of space introduced by Thiering, does not involve the advocacy of a radical form of relativism, which would imply the impossibility of a general scientific description of the space pattern(s); on the contrary, Thiering discusses several models of classification of space based on different FoR (*frames of reference*) (see chapter 3, *Sprachliche Referenzrahmen*): Levinson's distinction between intrinsic (object-oriented), relative (observer-oriented) and absolute FoR (object- and observer-independent, like for instance cardinal points); Jackendoff's classification between intrinsic and environment-dependent FoR, which he further specifies into geometric frame, motion frame, canonical orientation frame and canonical encounter frame, on the one hand, and gravitational frame, geographical frame, contextual frame and orientation-mirroring observer frame, on the other hand respectively; Gary Palmer's frames of orientation. Once one of these (or other) FoR are chosen, it is possible to split the various N-spaces into a specific pattern (for instance, into either intrinsic or relative or absolute FoR, if Levinson's model is adopted). In this way, Thiering's proposal allow for a more complex and productive concept of space, without running the risk of falling in a purely descriptive and scientifically vague theoretical approach.

The main virtue of Thiering's volume is its multifunctional and flexible nature. It is indeed a handbook of cognitive semantics and anthropology, featuring the state of the art and the chief theoretical positions and experimental results but, at the same time, it offers an original and peculiar scientific contribution, that is the

notion of N-space; it is an introduction to the core concepts and notions of the field but, at the same time, it provides an exhaustive survey of applied research; it is an excellent contribution to the actual debate in the fields of cognitive sciences but, at the same time, it also presents a historical account of the discipline; it is finally a book on the general problem of the relationship among language, cognition and culture but, at the same time, also a thorough work on the specific problem of space cognition.

Simone Aurora  
Università degli Studi di Padova  
simone.aurora@unipd.it

## References

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