Introduction

Semantics – a theory in search of an object

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The French Marxist Georges Politzer – later to be executed by the Nazis at Mont Valérien – began his classic *Critique of the foundations of psychology* with the following remark:

Even if no one considers protesting against the general claim that theories are mortal and that science can only advance over its own ruins, it is barely possible to make the proponents of an existing theory recognize its death. The majority of academics is composed of researchers who, having neither the sense of life, nor that of truth, can only work in the shelter of officially recognized theories: it is impossible to ask them to acknowledge a fact which isn’t a *given*, but which has to be created . . . And so they acknowledge the mortality of all theories, even their own, but only in the abstract: it always strikes them as unlikely that, for *them*, the instant of death could already have arrived.

(1974 [1928]: 1; trans NR)

The young philosopher’s declaration is impressive for many reasons. But if Politzer’s disdain for his contemporaries smacks of the anticlericalism of the (future) cardinal, he can also be criticized for grounding the explanation of a social phenomenon – the longevity of classical psychology, in an “experimental” or “scientific” guise, in the wake of Wundt – on personal and moral considerations, not on the concrete ones to which, as a good materialist, he ought really to have appealed.

Both Politzer’s evaluation of the state of psychology in his time and the explanation for it he offers are worth considering in light of current linguistic semantics, a subfield whose object – meaning and reference – could hardly be more ambiguous or protean, and which is studied by a highly various scatter of often incompatible theoretical approaches, each of which makes truth-claims, at least implicitly, in favour of its own kind of analysis. As the different chapters of this handbook attest, these various approaches are all in rude good health, offering stimulating insights into different aspects of the phenomenon we call meaning. In such a situation of rich theoretical heterogeneity, it is no surprise that consensus is almost wholly absent about any of the key questions semantics sets out to answer: what meaning as an object of study might, in detail, amount to; how it – whatever “it” is – should be theoretically approached; how – even pretheoretically – it should be characterized on the
level of individual expressions, constructions, and utterances; and what relation semantics should entertain with other fields of enquiry within and outside linguistics. Significantly differing points of view on some or all of these questions are characteristic of the different competitor theories that populate the field. Depraetere and Salkie’s generalization in Chapter 20 about the study of tense – “even the basics are controversial” – applies in spades to semantics as a whole.

This heterogeneity might, of course, be no more than a consequence of the comparative youth of the modern empirical study of language, especially in so far as meaning is concerned. If this is the case, however, it’s striking how little explicit theory-evaluation is undertaken by semantics researchers, and how rarely theoretical bridges between different research programmes are even sought, let alone found. Exceptions exist, of course, such as the effort made to assess the compatibility between Cognitive Semantics and Relevance Theory (e.g. Wilson (2011)) or the consistent effort by Anna Wierzbicka to compare her Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) theory to alternative accounts. In general, though, the various schools of semantic research pursue largely independent programmes. No doubt as a result, the lack of consensus within the discipline is all too rarely even acknowledged. This is particularly the case for the most basic characterization of descriptive meaning in lexical semantics, on which so many subsequent theoretical explorations rest.

Before one can investigate how meanings relate to syntax or pragmatics, or to each other, or how they change, vary, or are acquired, one has to have an account of what these meanings are. This, however, is the locus of the most vexed, but also the most disavowed, questions in the field. Unless they take lexical meaning as atomic, semanticists of different schools continue to assert that the “meaning” of such and such an expression is such and such, despite the fact that many in the discipline are likely not to agree with them, and assuming that any disagreements are merely a consequence of lack of research, likely to be resolved with further work – something of a convenient fiction, given that people have been trying to write systematic definitions for many centuries at least. The disagreements are not trivial, and have substantive consequences for semantic modelling, as I have argued elsewhere (Riemer 2005). Since the methodological canons linguistics has adopted from the natural sciences make expert consensus a necessary, if not a sufficient, condition for confidence in the discipline’s results, its almost complete absence in the study of meaning is the elephant in the room of any semantics that wants to associate itself with the empiricism and scientificity mostly assumed in “mainstream” linguistics, and it should, I believe, prompt some serious reconsideration of the nature of the discipline.

To say that the heterogeneity of current theoretical efforts should be the occasion for disciplinary self-reflection is not to say that there is anything intrinsically problematic in it. The theoretical balkanization in studies of meaning need only be seen as a flaw if it is taken for granted that semantics, on the model of physics, should be aiming at a unique theory of all meaning. Given the ongoing influence on linguistics of a model of enquiry rooted in how the natural sciences are, at least, imagined to be, this assumption is the one that is either typically made, or that seems tacitly presupposed by most semanticists’ work. Different semantic investigations are most naturally understood as early contributions to the search for the authoritative, final account of natural language meaning. Investigators are likely to construe themselves as collectively engaged, at least ideally, in a convergent intellectual project, which will ultimately issue in the emergence of a single theory of meaning in natural language – itself taken to be an objective phenomenon open to techniques of observation and explanation that are certainly exacting and labour-intensive, but at least epistemically uncontroversial. Theoretical heterogeneity is therefore likely to be seen, in principle, as nothing other than a staging post on the road towards a final theory of meaning for natural language.
Current investigations into semantics characteristically form part of a project intended to illustrate and stress the pluralism and diversity of human mentality and culture. Nevertheless, the overarching tendency of semantic research I have just sketched, along with its default goal – to characterize the semantic structure of languages – arguably sits uneasily with this intent, for two reasons. First, it presupposes that linguistic expressions function in linguistic interaction by conveying fixed and invariant content, which it is the semanticist’s task to characterize. This assumption is not only less self-evident than it seems (Riemer 2013), it also implies the controversial postulation of a clear boundary between linguistic and non-linguistic information, and sidelines a hermeneutic perspective that might do better justice to the contextual co-construction of significance between speaker and hearer (the ideas developed in Gadamer (2004) [1960], especially chapter 5, give some indication of the premises of such a perspective).

Second, it all too often implies the existence of a level of analysis on which cultural and cognitive diversity bottoms out into a format that can be captured in a unique analytical metalanguage – typically, given the history of linguistics, one built out of meaningful elements of English or some other first-world, Western language. English (or French, or German, or . . .), we assume, can be used to semantically analyze any other language, but not any language can be used to semantically analyze English or other first-world languages, since many languages lack the appropriate lexical and other resources. If semantic theory had succeeded in achieving a widely accepted body of confirmed results in its “Standard Average European” (SAE)-based metalanguages, it would be hard to see this asymmetry as anything more than an instance of the obvious dependence of theoretical enquiry on highly developed technical registers in the languages in which it is conducted. But in the absence of consensus in the discipline, it is reasonable to ask whether the assumption that all meanings can be represented in SAE metalanguages is justified.

In its totalizing ambition, there are many reasons to think that the project of reductively characterizing semantic structure may be undesirable in itself. As Stanley Rosen notes, “every hermeneutical program is at the same time itself a political manifesto or the corollary of a political manifesto” (2003: 141). This applies a fortiori to the programme of linguistic semantics, the goal of which is not, as in (applied) hermeneutics, to interpret texts, but to give an account of the very constituents of meaning that any textual interpretation presupposes. Since semantic analyses of language – or, to give them an older name, attempts to identify the “language of thought” – are closely related to claims about the conceptual abilities of speakers and the cultural resources of communities, we semanticists surely should be – and often are – cautious in arguing for the theoretical uniqueness for our current models of meaning. Claiming that, from the point of view of the linguistic system, such and such an expression has such and such core or central semantic properties risks reductively diminishing our picture of the complexity of languages, and hence of the linguistic practices and conceptual and cultural richness of their speakers.

Science, however, always operates through idealizing analytical procedures which carry exactly these kinds of risk. If there were strong evidence in favour of the correctness of one particular semantic model over another, and hence of the particular characterizations of meaning it supplied, the qualms that I am airing here could be dismissed as misguided and antiscientific Romanticism. But in the absence of consensus about meaning and its study, semanticists should surely be careful not to give the wrong impression about the status of our investigations into meaning. The down-side of doing so is starkly revealed when we consider the situation of semanticists from the first world turning their attention to mapping the underlying meaning structure of indigenous and minority languages currently threatened by
the forces of global capitalism. Moody-Adams’ (2014) observation, in a recent review of a
book on anthropology and philosophy, about anthropologists’ claim to theoretically account
for culture and society also applies to linguists’ claim to theoretically account for meaning:

as a discipline, ethnography has rightly felt the need to come to terms with its ori-
gins in the context of colonialism, and the question of whether, even unwittingly, the
claims of the (mostly western) “outsider” to be able to provide authoritative under-
standings of another’s way of life might be inextricably bound up with the effort to
dominate the other.

In this light, the claim of, for instance, Wierzbicka (2014) to transcend the intellectual
domination of English through a rigorously established unique metalanguage for meaning
description simply seems to replace one code (English) with another (NSM) as the uniquely
authoritative metalanguage of semantic analysis. Wierzbicka’s impetus to resist ethnocen-
trism in semantic analysis and its accompanying “colonialism of thought” are admirable and
would be widely shared. But regardless of the particular theoretical framework adopted, it is
offset by the objectivation of meaning that flows from the adoption of a unique and exclusive
metalanguage for the description of semantic content, which arguably duplicates the very
hegemonic move it sets out to avoid. Whether it is English, the NSM, cognitive semantics
analyses, or model-theoretic formalizations that are claimed as the best representational for-
mat for characterizing semantic structure, the result is to reduce what arguably should be
seen as an inherently plural, hermeneutically open-ended and fluid object – the significance
of natural discourse – to a unique and unambiguous level of content, fully capturable in the
theorist’s own code. This theoretical move is, arguably, impoverishing, since it enforces a
unitary conception of meaning, fixes interpretations, and, more often than not, presupposes
the existence of a unique metalanguage in which all meaning can be represented. If semantic
theory had commonly agreed-on explanatory achievements to show for this move, there
would be some reason to think that the attendant impoverishment was no more than a char-
acteristic instance of the idealization and simplification that always accompanies naturalistic
enquiry. In the absence of such achievements, different questions should arise.

The fact that these kinds of scruple are not usually raised in linguistic semantics makes it
all the more interesting to entertain them. While in other domains of enquiry the abstraction,
reduction, and idealization of descriptive facts reflects no more than the standard objectiv-
ingizing procedures of science, in a domain that, like semantics, is inherently bound up with the
intentions, values, and subjective interpretations of human actors, such a methodological deci-
sion risks excluding the hermeneutic dimension arguably unique to meaningful interaction,
and it should not be taken lightly. As a human “science”, semantics concerns a sphere that is
intrinsicly bound up with the behaviour of autonomous creatures with their own pluralistic
ways of being and understanding. In such a domain, it is not immediately clear that theoretical
insight is best obtained by objectifying reduction, assimilating meaning to a unique object
open to empirical methods deriving from the study of the objective world, instead of by plu-
ralistic interpretation, assimilating the study of meaning to that of higher-level socio-cultural
manifestations. Cultural anthropology, literary history, and sociology – all three empirical
disciplines that offer explanations, and not just descriptions, of their objects of study – do not
aim to produce unique and reductive analyses of their explananda; it is no more obvious that
semanticists should try to uniquely characterize the literal meaning of an expression than it
is that literary historians should try to uniquely pin down the single correct interpretation of
a canonical text.
There is nothing antiscientific, relativist, or irrational in this suggestion. Endorsing a pluralistic conception of meaning doesn’t entail somehow exempting linguistic behaviour from the scope of objectifying empirical science. There will, no doubt, one day be a science of linguistic behaviour, in the sense of a deterministic and causal account of the production and reception of utterances, and it is unjustified, at the moment, to assume otherwise. But we should recognize that any future, predictive understanding of linguistic behaviour seems unlikely to emerge from theories of the language system developed in linguistics or some other human science, but will instead arise within the neurosciences, with their entirely different explanatory regimes.

In approaching meaning in semanticists’ characteristic reductive manner, there seems plenty of grounds for us to worry that we ourselves are guilty of the “refusal” that Gadamer identifies as key to the methodology of modern natural science – “namely, to exclude all that which actually eludes its own methodology and procedures” (1972: 93). We are so used to pretheoretical talk about meanings and definitions that it is easy to forget how alien such constructs are to our experience of language use. Phenomenologically, it is a commonplace observation that we do not usually even experience utterances as having meanings, if by “meaning” we mean some extra factor that is separable from the chain of sounds being spoken, and of which we are independently aware. Only in cases of communicative “breakdown”, where the speaker’s communicative intention fails to be realized and misunderstanding ensues, are linguistic actors forced to scrutinize the relation between their intention, the words spoken, and the communicative result, and hence posit meanings to clarify the way in which communicative purpose has not been adequately fulfilled (see Riemer (2015) for some discussion). At other times, language resembles other complex symbolic activities, like music or gesture, for which it would never occur to us to posit invariant contents underlying the different units of which they are composed.

A semiotic conception of language, in which words are above all signs – for propositions, things, or concepts – goes hand in hand with an instrumentalist one, in which speakers are, above all, in a relation of use towards their utterances, which they consciously select and put to the service of communicating their thoughts. Gadamer, once again, observes that:

"Semantics is a doctrine of signs, in particular, of linguistic signs. Signs, however, are a means to an end. They are put to use as one desires and then laid aside just as are all other means to the ends of human activity . . . . Actual speaking is more than the choice of means to achieve some purpose in communication. The language one masters is such that one lives within it, that is “knows” what one wishes to communicate in no way other than in linguistic form. “Choosing” one’s words is an appearance or effect created in communication when speaking is inhibited. “Free” speaking flows forward in forgetfulness of oneself and in self-surrender to the subject-matter made present in the medium of language.

(1972: 87)

The instrumentalist conception, by contrast, makes language simply a tool. Here too, we should register the phenomenological implausibility of such an approach to linguistic interaction. Against it, it can be objected that the description of people as using language rings just as false as a description of them “using” light to see or “using” notes to sing melodies. In all three cases, any initial appeal that the instrumental construal of these situations might have is quickly challenged by an alternative conception in which language, light, or the musical scale are seen not as tools, but as conditions of possibility of the situations involving them. Just as light is the condition of possibility of seeing and the musical scale the
condition of possibility of music, so too language should be conceived of not as a simple tool of communication, but as a necessary condition for the enactment of subjectivity – or, to use Enfield’s (2009: 74) phrase, “situated micro-politics” – a formulation that also entails intersubjectivity and all the forms of coordinated interaction that we call communication. Our agentive relationship to language mostly seems better construed not on the instrumental model of the speaker consciously selecting particular words in the same way that the carpenter, for instance, selects a particular hammer for a specific and independently defined task. Instead, a better analogy for the speaker’s relation to her words is that between a sculptor and the wood or stone she is carving; just as the wood or stone plays a major role in shaping and constraining the sculptor’s physical gestures, language plays a major role in constraining and shaping the speaker’s linguistics ones, which are structured as much, if not more, by the contextual affordances of the medium of language as by the specific intentions of the speaker.

The lack of phenomenological warrant for talk of meaning opens semantics up to the various “situated” critiques of broader cognitive science that have come to the fore in the last several decades (see Riemer (2013) for further comments). It is just one of many reasons to be open to alternatives to the assumption that language is subtended by fixable, deterministic meanings of the kind that many linguists usually presuppose – invariant items of (conceptual) content, perhaps decomposable, and shared between participants in communicative exchanges. Just as we can explain the complex kinds of coordination that we achieve with each other in music, dance, or gesture without recourse to such factors, so an explanation of language use along similar lines would not seem to be impossible – and is, in fact, already present to a greater or lesser extent in some of the chapters of this volume.

It bears emphasizing once more that these scruples would be much less justified if semanti-cists had succeeded in developing comprehensive and plausible analyses of meaning that had won acceptance through the discipline as a whole. In their absence, there seems good reason to question the presuppositions that inform our work. Rather than seeing the goal of semantics as being to develop final, exhaustive analyses of the “content” putatively conveyed by every expression of a language, and an account of the way these contents combine, we might see the discipline as engaged in an inherently pluralistic and hermeneutic explanatory enterprise, where what matters is not the generation of final statements about what any expression means, but a dialectical encounter with the multifarious ways in which expressions can be significant for us and for the people who use them. As Faye has recently reminded us, “we never just explain something; we always do it from a particular perspective, focusing on some features and ignoring others. An explanation is always about something; it is never of something” (2014: xi); it is part of a “rhetorical practice of communication” (ibid, viii), not the last word on the object being studied.

Approached in this way, the different incompatible projects that constitute the field of semantics today emerge as appropriately varied responses to differing questions, not, as a positivistic critic might claim, as final proof that semantics is a pseudoscience. Abandoning the expectation that we will achieve a unique theoretical account of meaning does not entail jettisoning any of the rich and explanatory achievements of semantic theory. If meaning is neither singular nor objective, then the interest of pursuing a theoretically centripetal, converging programme diminishes, and the kaleidoscopic character of existing semantics on display in this book should no longer cause us anxiety. There are, after all, many complex symbolic behaviours which do not call for reductive analysis in terms of fixed underlying “contents”. Music is only the most obvious example.

If some kind of unifying identity is wanted for contemporary semantic investigations, however, perhaps one can be suggested by the questions that motivate differing research
projects’ enquiry into meaning. According to the traditional conception, a meaning is attributed to an expression to account for certain aspects of its use – particularly its referential and inferential properties. Even though one might question the extent to which reference and inference are either intrinsic to meaning or exhaustive – in particular, the concentration on reference forms part of a conception of language which Austin’s illocutionary perspective has not sufficiently eclipsed – both define important questions to which we do not yet have satisfying answers. What determines the range of objects, situations, or properties to which an expression can be used to refer? What governs the links of compatibility and exclusion of various strengths to which expressions are subject? What non-referential factors affect the coordination between expressions and the interpersonal, environmental, and mental contexts in which they appear? In offering answers, semantic theories can be seen as supplying, in tandem with pragmatics, explanations for those dimensions of language “use” not covered by the other linguistics subfields. When it identifies “meaning” as the hidden explanatory factor in question, semantics invokes a shorthand explanatory concept which will, no doubt, not prove to correspond to any single unitary phenomenon, but which provides an abridged way of invoking whichever explanatory factor is relevant. Meaning becomes, in other words, not the object of which semantic theories offer explanatory accounts, as it has usually previously been conceived, but a portmanteau name for the variety of explanatory factors to which semantics appeals to explain use. On this way of conceiving of things, meaning is not the monolithic explanandum of the discipline of semantics, but the name of a variety of explanantia that are invoked in a variety of forms to account for particular facts about the way language is used.

It follows from this way of thinking about semantics that we should not expect to uncover any unique and monolithic “meaning” that expressions convey. Meaning is a shorthand concept that ties together a variety of diverse explanatory factors. There are, no doubt, many shorthand concepts of this nature. Colour, for example, seems to be one. To describe a book as “red” is a shorthand way of expressing the fact that when observed by normal eyes in normal lighting conditions, the book has a particular hue. But it is readily apparent that redness isn’t a property the book has inherently; it’s a relational property that holds between our nervous system, the surface of the book, and the quality of the light. Given different conditions, the same book would be a different colour: if we were wearing coloured glasses, for instance, or observing under certain artificial lighting situations. To talk of a word’s literal meaning may be a similar sort of shorthand, which provides us with a provisional starting point for the exploration of the way in which the use of expressions is underdetermined by their phonology and syntax. Like the other posits of synchronic linguistics, a description of literal meaning provides, in Vološinov’s useful phrase, a “conventional scale” on which actually occurring deviation can be plotted, but which “does not correspond to any real moment in the historical process of [linguistic] becoming” (Vološinov 1973 [1930]: 66).

Each of the chapters of this handbook – the ambition of which is to display the state of the art of some important parts of semantics as it is currently constituted – presents a snapshot of an existing area of ongoing semantic investigation, each characterized by its own internal logic. My intention in exploring the considerations above has not been to speak for any of the contributors, none of whom should be assumed to share any of the points of view reflected in this introduction. It is, in any case, only in trying to cohere the varying research projects of the subfield as part of a single intellectual effort that the considerations mooted above
arise. Nevertheless, the pluralism I have been recommending as desirable in the way we think about semantics does, perhaps, offer a perspective from which the reader can approach this book.

It is in the nature of this kind of volume that many readers will consult the chapters individually, with none of them necessarily being read in the context of the rest. For this kind of reader, the theoretical heterogeneity of these pages will not present an obstacle. More comprehensive readers, however, will hardly fail to be struck by the major contrast between approaches to meaning rooted in formal logic and those rooted in cognitive hypotheses about meaning as mental representation. The latter approaches are inherently internalistic, in the sense that meaning, for them, is individuated on the basis of differences of underlying mental structure (see Chapter 2); formal approaches, on the other hand, while they may be internalistic, are inspired by a truth-functional, externalist conception of meaning, the bases of which are outlined in Chapter 1.

Because semantics, like any other discipline, is a product of an ongoing tradition, the handbook includes a sketch of the history of investigations into meaning in the Western tradition (Chapter 3). This tradition, however, is much more diverse than is often appreciated, and is characterized by a number of different more or less “national” approaches. In my view, it is salutary for a book like this to look beyond the usual confines of what we can, without too much distortion, dub “mainstream” linguistic semantics – by which I mean the complex of theories and approaches originating with Montague for the formal side and with figures like Katz and Fodor, Goodenough, Lyons, and others on the non-formal. For this reason, I have chosen to include, in the form of Chapter 28, an introduction to the work of perhaps the most important French semanticist, François Rastier, whose achievements in the field remain largely unknown to English-language researchers. Rastier is far from the only scholar working outside the confines familiar to most proponents of the discipline in the mainstream tradition. His inclusion here is meant to suggest some of the ways in which semantics as it is mostly practised could be different. The other three chapters in this final part of the volume – on meaning acquisition, semantic processing, and the descriptive/expressive contrast – similarly suggest new directions for the discipline, either through confronting it with experimental studies of acquisition, comprehension or production, or by opening the study of meaning out to the non-cognitive domain of affect, hitherto considered almost wholly marginal to any serious semantic questions.

The other sections of the handbook address, in a self-explanatory way, some important dimensions of semantic study. Part II discusses three approaches to meaning – formal, cognitive, and corpus. Part III discusses the relationship between meaning and conceptualization; Part IV that between meaning and context. Lexical semantic topics are addressed in Part V, and Part VI contains discussions of certain central topics in semantic research, from nominals to lexical typology. A number of these make some use of formal machinery and will, as such, be less accessible to much of the general readership of a handbook like this. This should not, however, be a cause of concern: the split between formal and non-formal approaches is intrinsic to the discipline and cannot be papered over. Since, like any handbook, readers are unlikely to read the whole text, but will selectively choose only certain chapters, the most important consideration is to ensure that each chapter adopts a level of formalization appropriate for its likely readership.

Originally, a chapter on meaning change had been projected, to complement the discussion of diachronic issues in the chapters on semantic shift and on semantic typology. Peter Koch had completed most of a first draft, in German, of an extended version of this chapter at the time of his sudden death in July 2014. Peter’s death has not just deprived this volume
of a greater diachronic dimension; it has deprived the discipline of a highly respected figure, to whom it is an honour to dedicate this book. Peter’s full chapter will be appearing in a translation by Tessa Say in Päivi Juvonen’s and Maria Koptjevskaaja-Tamm’s forthcoming volume on *Lexico-typological approaches to semantic shifts and motivation patterns in the lexicon*, currently in preparation.

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As Politzer noted, it is in the nature of theory-development that the ideas in any published research will mostly be superseded. The spirit of cooperation and collective enquiry, by contrast, is altogether more durable. It’s therefore a great pleasure to acknowledge the numerous contributions to this volume from researchers from all over the world, whose help in various ways while the manuscript was being prepared was indispensable. It goes without saying that my greatest debt is to the authors of the various chapters. But I’m also very grateful to the numerous other people who made it easier, in different ways, to see this project through. In particular, I would like to thank Asifa Majid, Bart Geurts, Bernhard Wälchli, Beth Levin, Bill Carrasco, Brigitte Nerlich, Briony Neilson, Chris Kennedy, Derek Herforth, Elizabeth Traugott, Jacqueline Léon, James McElvenny, Jean-Michel Fortis, Lynne Murphy, Nick Enfield, Noella Budd, Paul Elbourne, Paul Portner, Peter Slezak, Phil Staines, Renaat Declerck, and Sam Jones. Participants in seminars and reading groups at the University of Sydney, the Laboratoire d’histoire des théories linguistiques (Université Paris-Diderot), and the University of New South Wales also played an invaluable role. All research is intrinsically collaborative, even when it is single-authored. Without the existence of a discipline – a collective intellectual environment, sustained over generations by thousands of people – no individual contributions would ever be possible. That general principle is even more applicable here since, without the generosity of all the people I have mentioned, it would have been simply impossible to finish this book.

References


