

Phil of Lang Seminar (F02): Notes for Seminar 2

A. Compositionality (Questions arising)

1. Is there a compositional account of the meaning of 'it is raining'? I think there must be, though it may be hard to say in detail what it is.
2. The account of compositionality that we have provided is very flexible (both because it is not 'mereological' and because it is not 'functional'). We can even allow for 'code' languages, since an expression may be taken to be derived from the expression that it encodes. Similarly, 'transformational' grammars can be accommodated. But note that in these cases we must allow that there are expressions that are not expressions of the language (there is if you like an 'implicit' syntax for the language).
3. I am inclined to think that compositionality must hold as long as it is allowed that semantic evaluation may proceed via syntactic objects which are not expressions of the language. Must be analogous to our understanding of a paradigmatically compositional language, the only major difference being in the possible enlargement of the syntactic domain.

B. The Desiderata

1. Compositionality, Correlation and Determination.
2. Neutrality.

C. Inadequacy of the Tarski Semantics

1. The dilemma.
2. Tarski semantics flounders on either horn.
3. Blatant violation of Neutrality.
4. No point in trying to disguise the typographic bias.
5. Tarski- and Frege-values and issue of compositionality versus neutrality.

6. The natural defensive response ‘this is the best one can do’. Thus my negative criticisms should be seen in the light of my positive suggestions, since they show that this is not the best one can do.

D. Contextualism

1. The semantics as contextual or relative. Distinction between ‘content’ and ‘character’ (Frege- versus Tarski-value).
2. But as we have noted, the semantics of content is not compositional, the semantics of character is not neutral.
3. Argument that the character of a variable involves that very variable.

E. The Dismissive Response

1. Various forms. Focus on the first: we are only interested in the representational role of closed sentences.
2. Two responses. First, open expressions have a representational role and we would like a semantics to account for what it is.
3. Second, even if our interest is exclusively in closed sentences, we might not want to make invidious distinctions between mere notational variants. But the Tarski semantics does that.

F. The Instantial Response

1. The general idea of accounting for the semantics of a quantified statement in terms of its instances.
2. Does not account for the semantics of open expressions.
3. Two versions: substitutional; and singular. The substitutional delivers incorrect results and is suspect as a piece of syntax.
4. The singular is more promising. But it is still suspect as a piece of syntax and is not extensional.

G. The Algebraic Response

1. The semantics for predicate logic is to be modeled on the semantics for relational algebra.
2. The main problem with this approach is that it is unbelievable. It invokes indeterminacy and contextual sensitivity where none appears to exist.

3. It also has a problem in properly accounting for semantic relations between open expressions.