The internal nature of meaning

In this talk I will argue for an internalist account of meaning and propositions. Language is not a meaningless bearer of meaning. Syntax itself contributes to the determination of meaning. Especially, I'll argue that the notion of proposition does not concern content but structure.

First, syntactic structures have semantic effects, and so the interpretation must follow this syntactic paths. In other words, there is a structural part of meaning that is irreducibly syntactic and internal.

A well-known phenomena is what syntacticians call the Principles A, B and C of the Binding Theory. According to Principle A, for instance, (7) cannot mean that Peter wants John to shave him, Peter (it must mean that Peter wants John to shave himself, John):

(7)   Peter wants John to shave himself

Note that this constraint is not rational or required by anything semantic or pragmatic. It is structural in nature, but it has semantic consequences anyway.

Even some constraints that appear at first to be semantic can very well turn out to be syntactic. For instance, take the argumental structure that determines the complements that a predicate has to take and those that are only optional. For example, the predicate *to run* takes one complement, a subject/runner, while *to eat* takes two complements, a subject/eater and an object/eatee. Given these examples, it may seem that those structural requirements depend on our semantic intuition on the events that the predicates can be used to describe.

Now, argumental structure is not any more rational than principles of the Binding Theory. Functional requirements of lexical items do not necessarily have a semantic explanation. Functional requirements, that we will call *argumental structure*, are actually arbitrary syntactic requirements.

Let's show that. Consider the following utterance:

(10) John sold his car to Mary for 1000$

Here the verb *to sell* takes four complements, but let's assume that only the first two ("John" and "his car") are *arguments* (that is, as defined by the syntactic theory, complements lexically required as part of the argumental structure of the predicate), the last two, or at least the last one ("for 1000$") can be considered as only *adjuncts* (that is, optional complements, that are not required by argumental structure).

Now the point I want to make is that our semantic intuitions do not enable us to determine *a priori* functional requirements. Actually, selling *for a price* does not seem to be less necessary for an event of selling to happen than selling *something*. The notion of a sale implies that there is a price (if not, this is a gift) and a purchaser as well as a thing sold and a seller. It remains, though, that an utterance of *John sold to Mary for 1000$* sounds dramatically incomplete and so meaningless because it lacks a thing sold, while *John sold his car to Mary* seems to be meaningful even though it lacks the specification of a price. So there is a constraint of the argumental structure on on the meaningfulness of sentences.

So we can conclude that expressions, which are internal entities generated by the faculty of language, strongly constrain the interpretation.

Now I want to show that such a syntactic constraint makes possible to rethink the notion of proposition in a non-semantic fashion. A proposition is supposed to be the truth-evaluable content of an expression. That is, it is what is expressed by an expression, provided that it is complete enough to be evaluated. But how can we define "complete"? As we just showed, the notion of completeness regarding argumental structure is not rationally, that is semantically, grounded. So what is propositional, truth-evaluable, is not rationally/semantically grounded either. There are no

"complete thought" in our minds or facts out there that an expression should match to be truth-evaluable. An expression brings its own criterion of completeness intrinsically (that is, syntactically). It follows that there are propositional structures, but no propositions as non-linguistic entities.

So we suggest that our intuitions on propositionality are not intuitions on content, but on sentential structure. We put forth the following hypothesis: *the notion of propositionality is a syntactic notion*.

For sure, the structure does not determine by itself the truth-conditions of an utterance. Those conditions depend on what the speaker says, on its external use of the expression. It remains that a necessary condition for an utterance to be evaluable is that its argumental structure is satisfied. And we actually can say whether or not an utterance is propositional, even though we are unable to evaluate the utterance, because our knowledge of propositionality is structural in nature: *He invited her* is propositional, there is no need to know the reference of pronouns to be aware of that, some structural knowledge is enough; by contrast, *Peter invited* is not propositional, because its argumental structure is not fulfilled.

The next question is: why is that so? As my arguments on the argumental structure of lexical items showed, this is not because we have the semantic intuition that syntax should conform to a definite kind of structure; on the contrary, it is because syntax generates a definite kind of structure that we have some definite intuitions, apparently semantic, but actually syntactic in nature, on the completeness of utterances. A propositional structure *is* a structure that is syntactically complete.

That is, if I judge that *Mary sold her car* expresses a complete thought but *Mary sold to John* does not, this is *not* because those utterances express contents that are *a priori* complete or incomplete independently of language, but on the contrary because syntax puts structural constraints on sentences. So our theory requires a reversal of the perspective on the syntax/semantics interface.

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