

What words mean and express: semantics and pragmatics of kind terms and verbs



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Abstract

For many years, it has been common-ground in semantics and in philosophy of language that semantics is in the business of providing a full explanation about how propositional meanings are obtained. This orthodox picture seems to be in trouble these days, as an increasing number of authors now hold that semantics does not deal with thought-contents. Some of these authors have embraced a “thin meanings” view, according to which lexical meanings are too schematic to enter propositional contents. I will suggest that it is plausible to adopt thin semantics for a class of words. However, I’ll also hold that some classes of words, like kind terms, plausibly have richer lexical meanings, and so that an adequate theory of word meaning may have to combine thin and rich semantics.

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1. Introduction

For many years, it has been common-ground in semantics and in philosophy of language that semantics is in the business of providing a full explanation about how truth-conditional meanings are obtained. In this vein, it has been assumed that the goal of the discipline is to provide a description of how lexical meanings combine compositionally to produce a proposition, i.e., a thought content. Perhaps it has not always been put in terms of thoughts, but, as it has also been assumed that propositions are the contents of propositional attitudes, semantics has been assumed to be concerned with explaining how sentences, or sentences in contexts, express thoughts. This orthodox picture seems to be in trouble these days. An increasing number of authors now hold that semantics does not deal with thought-contents. In particular, they hold that the semantic values corresponding to word-types may have the “wrong format” (Recanati, 2004; Carston, 2012, 2013, 2016a) to produce propositional contents. This, in most cases, amounts to saying either that there is a proprietary semantic ontology, i.e. that there is a distinctive realm of meanings, a realm apart from the realm of contents, or that lexical meanings, although drawing from conceptual material, are too schematic to enter propositional contents. In this paper I will be concerned with these two positions, which I will call “thin semantics”. The differences between these two positions are not as important as it might seem: to a large extent, it depends on what we take concepts to be. If, for instance, we assume that concepts are the building blocks of thought-contents, then the claim that lexical meanings do not stand for pieces that can form part of propositional contents ipso facto entails that lexical meanings are not conceptual.¹

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¹ Recanati (2004) distinguishes two versions of the “wrong format” view. According to the first version, lexical meanings are too schematic and informationally poor to be part of truth-conditional contents. According to the second version, lexical meanings are too rich to be building blocks of propositional contents: propositional contents are composed of only part of the information provided by lexical meanings. I find more appropriate to reserve the label ‘wrong format’ only for the view which holds that lexical meanings are not conceptual. This view has it that, in effect, word-type meanings come in the “wrong” representational format. In any case, this terminological point is not important, and I will make scarce use of the label “wrong format”.

Chomsky's writings against truth-conditional, denotational, semantics have been clearly influential in this general movement away from past orthodoxy (e.g., Chomsky, 2000; Yalcin, 2014; Pietroski, 2005, 2017). However, he has not been the sole influence by any means. The contextualist movement in pragmatics has had a profound impact as well. For instance, Charles Travis' influential attack on truth-conditional semantics has many points in common with Chomsky's, both in terms of the kind of problematic examples he uses and in terms of the general lesson he seems to draw from these examples (Travis, 2008). Carston's (2002) and Recanati's (2004) style of contextualism, on the other hand, has targeted the idea that lexical meanings could be concepts (i.e. the mental representations we use in higher level cognition) and that sentences could encode truth-evaluable compositions of concepts (i.e., psychologically real thoughts). It is also interesting to mention that the distinction between the semantic and the conceptual can be found as well both in work dating from the late eighties/early nineties (Bierwisch and Schreuder, 1992) as well as in recent work in Cognitive Linguistics (Evans, 2009). The idea, in all cases, is that the link between words and concepts is mediated by intermediate representations that, in one way or other, constrain what concepts a word can express.

In this paper, I will present a view according to which propositional contents arise from combinations of rich, structured, concepts, and more schematic meanings. By focusing on kind terms on the one hand and verbs on the other, I will try to show that this general view has some plausibility.² I will try to argue that prototypical nouns such as kind terms give access to rich concepts, some kind of structured encyclopedic information, which is relevant to construe propositional, truth-evaluable, contents. In contrast, verbs provide just some abstract information that is enriched and specified in context, to a large extent depending on the arguments they take. The meanings of both kinds of terms can be modulated in context (Recanati, 2010), but whereas modulation of kind term meanings typically result in vague and open-ended *ad hoc* concepts (Allott and Textor, 2012), modulation of verb meanings look more like specifications or concretizations.

The structure of the paper is the following. I will begin by presenting reasons that have convinced some that semantics requires its own ontology or representational level, and how these authors account for some of the facts that semantics was assumed to have to explain. In order to keep the discussion focused, I will use some of Robyn Carston's proposals as illustration, given that she is one of the authors who have devoted more work to this issue, beginning with her proposals in Carston (2002). While in Carston (2016b), she advances a rather different account and even criticizes the "thin meanings" approach, her past views are still among the most worked-out proposals in the thin meanings camp. After presenting Carston's past suggestions, I will present some particular facts that thin meaning theories have to explain, and argue that thin semantic meanings find no role to play in the most sensible explanations compatible with the theories. This, I will try to show, should take us towards a different picture, where the lexical meanings of at least some lexical pieces are taken to contain rich conceptual information. However, not all lexical pieces are likely to be as informationally rich as others. Kind or sortal nouns (i.e. nouns which denote kinds, or sortals) are likely to be rich, while, e.g., verbs, are probably sketchier, which eventually means that semantic theory has to combine thin and rich lexical meanings.

2. Semantic underdeterminacy

One powerful source of discomfort with traditional truth-conditional semantics is the generalization of the phenomenon known as "semantic underdeterminacy" (Carston, 2002), which consists in the claim that the semantic information encoded by a sentence underdetermines its propositional meaning. Carston and other pragmaticians show that even very simple sentences can express different propositions in different contexts after their eventual indexical constituents have been fixed. Propositions, on this account, are psychologically realistic thoughts, i.e., truth-evaluable compositions of concepts/mental representations, but their view generalizes to any other account of propositional contents. In general: sentences fall short of having, or carrying, propositional contents, because variations in the context of utterance of a sentence generate variations in its truth-evaluations. To this, it has to be added that we are not justified in identifying any of these possible propositional contents as *the* proposition expressed by the sentence. That is, all, or at least, many, of the propositions that the sentence can be used to express are on equal footing in this respect.

According to Carston and many others, the reason why sentences do not have propositional contents is that some of their constituting parts (words) do not have determinate, stable, contents which can form part of propositions. Many examples illustrate this: putting it now in terms of denotations, the genitive in 'John's car is fast' can stand for the relation *property of*, as well as the relation *being driven by*, the relation *having bet on*, etc. In 'the leaves are green' (Travis, 1996), it is customarily said that 'green' can stand for a certain color that the leaves possess or a certain color that they display. And as stressed by Chomsky (2000), even proper names lack a fixed denotation: 'London' can stand for a determinate geographical place, its inhabitants, its Council, etc. Lacking a stable denotation is not something that affects some

² Cohen (1971) is a clear antecedent of rich lexical semantics: he argues that the meaning of connectives in natural language is far richer than their logical counterparts and that occasional meanings of connectives result from selection of some features and deletion of others. Wierzbicka (1985), on the other hand, can be seen as an antecedent of the view that kind terms have rich meanings (see also, Moerdijk, 2008), and even as an antecedent of the view that verb meanings have a comparatively thinner semantics (Goddard and Wierzbicka, 2016).

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