



Semantics naturalized: Propositional indexing plus interactive perception

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Abstract

A concrete proposal is presented as to how semantics should be naturalized. Rather than attempting to naturalize propositions, they are treated as abstract entities that *index* concrete cognitive states. In turn the relevant concrete cognitive states are identified via perceptual classifications of worldly states, with the aid of an interactive theory of perception. The approach enables a broadly realist theory of propositions, truth and cognitive states to be preserved, with propositions functioning much as abstract mathematical constructs do in the non-semantic sciences, but with a much more specific propositional indexing scheme than previous naturalistic proposals were able to achieve.

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What would it be to naturalize semantics, and how should it be done? To answer these two related questions, one must have some definite conception of the main considerations relevant to the naturalization of semantics, along with some procedure for actually carrying out the naturalization. I shall address both issues in this paper. Addressing the first involves providing a description of a specific conception of what a semantic naturalization project should involve, along with its metaphysical and epistemic presuppositions. This first part of the project cannot be fully defended here, but serves rather as a preliminary motivation for the second task, which is to actually carry out a semantic naturalization project in enough detail so that its main features become apparent. If this second part

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of the project is potentially successful, it will also serve as some indirect motivation for the first part. To begin, here is the first part.

As a scientific realist, I am attracted to a propositional version of a substantive conception of truth as correspondence to reality. On such a view, the concept of an objective ontological fact, such as that of some particular object X actually having a property F – in metaphysical independence from our conceptions of it – cannot be disentangled from a closely linked conception of there being a true proposition which states that object X has property F. On this view, truth is a substantive property of a subset of abstract propositional entities, which consists in the fact that they correspond to, or correctly represent the fact that, object X does in fact have property F. So on this approach, truth is correct propositional representation of a fact, and falsity is incorrect propositional representation of a fact – that is, representing the fact as being some way that it is not.

The initial connection of this conception of propositional truth with naturalization is as follows. Natural science cannot proceed without some theoretical presuppositions as to what science is attempting to do. The standard realist conception is that science seeks to confirm or disconfirm a *scientific theory*, where a theory is a collection of propositions that make claims about how the world actually is. The substantive propositional conception of truth outlined above arguably is an integral theoretical part of this metatheory, or body of theoretical presuppositions, of standard realist science.

So on this fairly common realist view, a naturalization of semantics does not, indeed *could not*, be an attempt to naturalize the relevant concepts of proposition, truth, and correct or incorrect representation themselves. They are *part of the metatheory*, and hence *off limits* to scientifically based naturalization projects. Any science whatsoever presupposes those abstract concepts, including any empirical sciences that study semantic aspects of human and animal cognition. So on this general realist conception of science, and of what it is to scientifically naturalize any claims about the world, what needs to be naturalized is not those basic semantic concepts themselves, but rather any substantive semantic theories that make empirical claims about how human or animal semantic cognition actually works. What is needed for semantic naturalization must be restricted to scientifically respectable theories showing how actual cognitive mechanisms and structures relate to the standard propositional framework.

To be sure, nothing is completely off limits to science. One can perhaps imagine at least the abstract possibility of successful attacks on the metatheory of standard realist science, which would put in doubt, or even overthrow, the substantive conception of the truth of scientific theories as consisting in the correspondence of their propositional claims with reality. But *what we actually have* within the scientific community as recognized serious criticisms of that metatheory – such as [van Fraassen's constructive empiricism \(1980\)](#) – is a much milder form of attack, such as the claim that science can work well enough without scientists having to have a full commitment to such a strong metatheory for *all* theoretical terms employed in science. Such a view recognizes the centrality of the propositional model as a part of the basic structure of science, even as it counsels a less than whole-hearted epistemic commitment to it when the limits of strictly observational concepts are exceeded by scientific theorizing. But such specifically *epistemically* tempered kinds of criticism serve more to further entrench the propositional model, than to throw any doubt on its basic concepts, or their fundamental place in the metatheory.

So, perhaps ironically, it might be that only truly *drastic* failures of *semantic naturalization attempts themselves* – i.e., epistemically striking extreme failures, during repeated

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