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## FORUM

### On conceptual semantics

RAY JACKENDOFF

12 **Keckses:** *One of the most intriguing claims of your theory of conceptualist*  
13 *semantics is that each lexical item makes reference to phonological, syntac-*  
14 *tic, and semantic structures, so the lexicon must be conceived of as a part of*  
15 *the linguistic interface module, rather than as a representational module it-*  
16 *self. This means that what we call the “lexicon” is not a distinct entity but*  
17 *rather a subset of the interface relations between the three grammatical*  
18 *subsystems. How can this approach make explicit the relations between*  
19 *grammatical semantics and conceptual knowledge?*

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21 **Jackendoff:** By “grammatical semantics,” I suppose you mean the as-  
22 pects of meaning that are relevant in determining grammatical struc-  
23 ture. Perhaps the most important of these is hierarchical structure, but  
24 they also include matters such as argument structure, plurality, aspect,  
25 modality, the mass/count distinction, quantifier scope, information struc-  
26 ture, and so on. By “conceptual knowledge,” I suppose you mean what  
27 others mean by “world knowledge,” a rich and interconnected system  
28 that goes well beyond language. In between these two, there is a large  
29 intermediate area that is usually considered the province of lexical  
30 semantics.

31 There is a widespread tradition in linguistics that one should be con-  
32 cerned with grammatical semantics and perhaps lexical semantics, but  
33 that a characterization of “world knowledge” is not part of the linguist’s  
34 domain and is probably intractable anyway. Yet the goal of linguistic  
35 communication is to convey something in this rich domain. Thus a prop-  
36 erly situated linguistic theory must take into account the interaction of  
37 linguistic information with perceptual context and with “world knowl-  
38 edge.” Conceptual Semantics (Jackendoff 1983, 1990) recognizes this  
39 necessity and attempts to fully integrate and justify the primitives of se-  
40 mantic theory with notions independently needed in human and primate  
41 cognition, such as the conceptualization of individuals, of spatial configu-  
42 ration, and of social relations.

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1     Within this framework, the meaning of a word is the full concept asso-  
2     ciated in long-term memory with the phonological and syntactic form of  
3     the word. The full concept in turn must contain linkages to larger seman-  
4     tic fields and to “semantic frames” in the sense of Fillmore and Atkins  
5     1992. In the Parallel Architecture (Jackendoff 2002; Culicover & Jackend-  
6     off 2005), the word functions as an interface rule that licenses linking the  
7     phonological, syntactic, and conceptual structures in working memory in  
8     the course of perceiving or producing an utterance.

9     We can now return to the question: What is the role of “grammatical  
10    semantics” in this framework? For reasons detailed in Jackendoff 2002,  
11    sections 9.6–7, I see no empirical reason for isolating the aspects of se-  
12    mantics that play a role in determining grammatical form as a separate  
13    component of “linguistic semantics.” An inventory of these aspects of  
14    meaning is a heterogeneous collection of semantic features that in no  
15    respect coheres into an intelligible structure. In addition to the factors  
16    mentioned above, these factors also include, for example, the peculiar as-  
17    pects of meaning involved in argument structure alternations (Pinker  
18    1989) and constructions such as the resultative (Goldberg & Jackendoff  
19    2004).

20    Notice also that these aspects of meaning specifically do not include  
21    purely lexical distinctions. Whatever their semantic differences, *dog* and  
22    *armadillo* look identical in syntax, as do *red* and *blue*, as do *five* and  
23    *nineteen*, as do *jog* and *sprint*. Thus “grammatical meaning” is a very lim-  
24    ited collection of semantic features.

25    My conclusion is that these factors do not form a natural semantic  
26    class. They are simply the aspects of conceptual structure that happen to  
27    play a role in the parts of the syntax-semantics interface that concern  
28    phrasal structure. There may or may not be a principled reason why these  
29    particular factors play such a role, which remains to be determined. But  
30    even if there is a principled reason, there is nothing to be gained by creat-  
31    ing an extra level of linguistic representation that isolates them. They are  
32    singled out only in the theory of the interface.

33    I might add that an important feature of the Parallel Architecture  
34    (Jackendoff 2002, chapter 6; Culicover & Jackendoff 2005) is that it aban-  
35    dons the strict distinction between words and grammatical rules. Rather,  
36    as in Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar, some versions of Cogni-  
37    tive Grammar, and especially Construction Grammar, there is a contin-  
38    uum extending from the idiosyncrasies of words, through idioms, which  
39    are idiosyncratic but involve syntactic structure, through constructions  
40    such as the resultative, which associate pieces of lexical-like meaning  
41    with pure structure, to fully general rules such as phrase structure rules.  
42    Thus there is room in the theory for constructional meaning that overlays

1 word meaning and interacts with it in complex fashion, and there is room  
2 for distinctions of speech register to appear in both a lexical and a struc-  
3 tural role.

4  
5 **Keckses:** *In making an attempt to put semantics on the same footing as*  
6 *phonology and syntax, you argue that it must be possible to decompose*  
7 *meaning into primitive elements (Jackendoff 2002). These primitives are*  
8 *similar to the distinctive features of phonology in that they are neither*  
9 *language-specific nor accessible to the conscious mind; that is, they are in-*  
10 *stantiated in the functional mind.*

11 *Wierzbicka (1996) also speaks about “semantic primes” in her natural*  
12 *semantic metalanguage (NSM) theory. The NSM theory is based on evi-*  
13 *dence that there is a small core of basic, universal meanings, known as se-*  
14 *matic primes, which can be found as words or other linguistic expressions*  
15 *in all languages. This common core of meaning can be used as a tool for*  
16 *linguistic and cultural analysis: to explicate complex and culture-specific*  
17 *words and grammatical constructions, and to articulate culture-specific*  
18 *values and attitudes (cultural scripts), in terms which are maximally clear*  
19 *and translatable. How do your “semantic primitives” relate to Wierzbicka’s*  
20 *“semantic primes” described in her natural semantic metalanguage theory*  
21 *(Wierzbicka 1996)?*

22  
23 **Jackendoff:** Although I think Wierzbicka has offered many insightful dis-  
24 cussions of word meaning, I do not think that her approach ultimately  
25 responds to the goals of Conceptual Semantics.

26 Conceptual Semantics (Jackendoff 1983; 2002, chapters 9–12) is con-  
27 cerned with how linguistic utterances are related to human cognition,  
28 where cognition is a human capacity that is to a considerable degree inde-  
29 pendent of language, interacting with the perceptual and action systems  
30 as well as language and present in some form also in our primate cousins.  
31 Insofar as possible, the primitive features and functions of Conceptual  
32 Semantics are motivated with these goals in mind, and explicit proposals  
33 have been made about how conceptual structures interface with visual  
34 perception (Jackendoff 1987, 1996). In addition, Conceptual Semantics  
35 shares with formal semantics a concern with accounting for the composi-  
36 tion of sentence meanings from the meanings of the words (though Con-  
37 ceptual Semantics is much more varied in the formal mechanisms it relies  
38 on and begins with a richer series of primitives), as well as a concern with  
39 accounting for inference in formal terms. Combined with the Parallel  
40 Architecture, Conceptual Semantics begins to offer a theoretical approach  
41 to language processing that fits together nicely with findings in psycho-  
42 linguistics (Jackendoff 2002, chapter 7), and lends itself to plausible

1 speculations about scenarios behind the evolution of the language capacity (Jackendoff 2002, chapter 8).

3 Wierzbicka, by contrast, stays very close to the linguistic ground. She  
4 analyzes words simply in terms of other words, so she never establishes  
5 any connection with cognitive capacities outside of language. She treats  
6 individual words in profusion but offers no account (that I am aware of)  
7 of how word meanings combine to form phrase and sentence meanings.  
8 Because she has no account of semantic composition, there is no over-  
9 all theory of the semantic structure of sentences. And in turn, this pre-  
10 vents her from offering an account of inference. There are no hints of  
11 how this approach lends itself to accounts of language processing. And  
12 since language is a completely self-referential system, it remains a total  
13 mystery how the language capacity could have evolved out of primate  
14 antecedents.

15  
16 **Keckes:** *According to your Representational Modularity approach, lexical*  
17 *items include phonological, syntactic, and semantic content. How are con-*  
18 *ceptual properties attached to lexical items? Do you think that your theory*  
19 *can explain conceptual differences that exist between lexically close equiva-*  
20 *lents in two languages, such as “lunch” in English and its lexical equivalent*  
21 *“comida” in Spanish? “Lunch” for a native speaker of American-English*  
22 *refers to a light meal consisting of a sandwich, soup, and salad, or some-*  
23 *thing else that is consumed in a 30- to 60-minute break around noon.*  
24 *“Comida,” for a Spaniard, denotes the main meal of the day (usually con-*  
25 *sisting of three courses) that s/he consumes between 1 and 4 o’clock (no*  
26 *Spanish restaurant will serve lunch before 1 p.m.). The core-sense of the*  
27 *two words is the same, there is no word-specific semantic property attached*  
28 *to either, however, they differ in culture-specific conceptual properties.*

29  
30 **Jackendoff:** I think this question is answered in part in my response to  
31 your first question. The culture-specific semantic properties you’ve men-  
32 tioned concern how the word meanings fit into larger conceptual frames.  
33 Conceptual Semantics makes no principled distinction between the repre-  
34 sentations involved in sentence meanings and those involved in world  
35 knowledge. Therefore there is no principled stopping point where one says  
36 “this is word meaning and the rest is encyclopedic/world/knowledge/  
37 culture.” All of this information belongs to the same “representational  
38 module.”

39 Now, to answer the question more directly, Conceptual Semantics can’t  
40 explain conceptual differences due to culture-specific frames. These are  
41 explained by social history or some such. However, the theory can de-  
42 scribe them, should we be concerned with that level of specificity in lexical

1 knowledge. In some recent work (Jackendoff forthcoming), I have ex-  
2 plored where culture-specific knowledge enters in our understanding of  
3 codes of conduct, morality, rights, and obligations.

4  
5 **Kecskes:** *In your works, you adopt a mentalist approach to meaning. Ac-*  
6 *ording to your conceptual semantics the world exists in the mind, it is*  
7 *brought into the mind through the various modes of sensory perception.*  
8 *Meaning expressed by language is thus connected to the world as it is*  
9 *conceptualized by the individual. However, individuals must tune their con-*  
10 *ceptualized worlds to those of other individuals in order to communicate*  
11 *effectively.*

12 *From a pragmatic perspective we could argue that world knowledge is*  
13 *available to interlocutors in two forms: as encapsulated in lexical items*  
14 *based on prior encounters and experience, and as provided by the actual*  
15 *situational context framed by the given situation (Kecskes 2003). Conse-*  
16 *quently, actual situational meaning is the result of the interaction of the*  
17 *two sides of world knowledge represented by the interlocutors (speaker*  
18 *and hearer) and the actual situational context. In the course of communica-*  
19 *tion, the speaker actualizes his/her conventionalized cognitive contexts en-*  
20 *coded in the lexical items to fulfill his/her communicative needs, attempting*  
21 *to match the requirements of the actual situational contexts and the needs*  
22 *of the hearer. The result of this effort is an utterance (utterances). The*  
23 *hearer internalizes the uttered linguistic context, that is, brings it into his/*  
24 *her mind, and matches it to his/her existing conventionalized, cognitive*  
25 *contexts. So the two prior “knowledges” (the knowledge of the speaker*  
26 *and the knowledge of the hearer) are matched to each other in an actual,*  
27 *“out there” context (situation). One of the prior “knowledges” is repre-*  
28 *sented in the utterances of the producer (speaker) while the other is*  
29 *represented in the head of the processor (hearer) who matches the uttered*  
30 *contexts to his/her prior experience with similar contexts in a frame repre-*  
31 *sented by the actual “out there” situation. Do you think that this pragmatic*  
32 *model may be compatible in any way with your line of thinking?*

33  
34 **Jackendoff:** Absolutely. I have been mostly concerned with the issue of  
35 what is in each individual’s head after the utterance takes place. Jackend-  
36 off 2002, sections 9.5 and 10.11, addresses some of the possible connec-  
37 tions to the perspective you sketch.

38 I should say, though, that I think you take too lightly the idea of an  
39 “actual situational context.” Something functions as a situational context  
40 for a language user only insofar as he or she has conceptualized it as such.  
41 So we have to be concerned with what things in the environment are  
42 *taken* by language users to be relevant context, bringing us to a still

1 more deeply mentalist position. Within that proviso, I take your sketch to  
2 be entirely in concordance with Conceptual Semantics.

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