Forums

On conceptual semantics

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Keeskes: One of the most intriguing claims of your theory of conceptualist semantics is that each lexical item makes reference to phonological, syntactic, and semantic structures, so the lexicon must be conceived of as a part of the linguistic interface module, rather than as a representational module itself. This means that what we call the "lexicon" is not a distinct entity but rather a subset of the interface relations between the three grammatical subsystems. How can this approach make explicit the relations between grammatical semantics and conceptual knowledge?

Jackendoff: By "grammatical semantics," I suppose you mean the aspects of meaning that are relevant in determining grammatical structure. Perhaps the most important of these is hierarchical structure, but they also include matters such as argument structure, plurality, aspect, modality, the mass/count distinction, quantifier scope, information structure, and so on. By "conceptual knowledge," I suppose you mean what others mean by "world knowledge," a rich and interconnected system that goes well beyond language. In between these two, there is a large intermediate area that is usually considered the province of lexical semantics.

There is a widespread tradition in linguistics that one should be concerned with grammatical semantics and perhaps lexical semantics, but that a characterization of "world knowledge" is not part of the linguist's domain and is probably intractable anyway. Yet the goal of linguistic communication is to convey something in this rich domain. Thus a properly situated linguistic theory must take into account the interaction of linguistic information with perceptual context and with "world knowledge." Conceptual Semantics (Jackendoff 1983, 1990) recognizes this necessity and attempts to fully integrate and justify the primitives of semantic theory with notions independently needed in human and primate cognition, such as the conceptualization of individuals, of spatial configuration, and of social relations.
Within this framework, the meaning of a word is the full concept associated in long-term memory with the phonological and syntactic form of the word. The full concept in turn must contain linkages to larger semantic fields and to “semantic frames” in the sense of Fillmore and Atkins 1992. In the Parallel Architecture (Jackendoff 2002; Culicover & Jackendoff 2005), the word functions as an interface rule that licenses linking the phonological, syntactic, and conceptual structures in working memory in the course of perceiving or producing an utterance.

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

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

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

I might add that an important feature of the Parallel Architecture (Jackendoff 2002, chapter 6; Culicover & Jackendoff 2005) is that it abandons the strict distinction between words and grammatical rules. Rather, as in Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar, some versions of Cognitive Grammar, and especially Construction Grammar, there is a continuum extending from the idiosyncrasies of words, through idioms, which are idiosyncratic but involve syntactic structure, through constructions such as the resultative, which associate pieces of lexical-like meaning with pure structure, to fully general rules such as phrase structure rules. Thus there is room in the theory for constructional meaning that overlays
word meaning and interacts with it in complex fashion, and there is room
for distinctions of speech register to appear in both a lexical and a struc-
tural role.

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

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

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

Conceptual Semantics (Jackendoff 1983; 2002, chapters 9–12) is con-
cerned with how linguistic utterances are related to human cognition,
where cognition is a human capacity that is to a considerable degree inde-
pendent of language, interacting with the perceptual and action systems
as well as language and present in some form also in our primate cousins.
Insofar as possible, the primitive features and functions of Conceptual
Semantics are motivated with these goals in mind, and explicit proposals
have been made about how conceptual structures interface with visual
perception (Jackendoff 1987, 1996). In addition, Conceptual Semantics
shares with formal semantics a concern with accounting for the composi-
tion of sentence meanings from the meanings of the words (though Con-
ceptual Semantics is much more varied in the formal mechanisms it relies
on and begins with a richer series of primitives), as well as a concern with
accounting for inference in formal terms. Combined with the Parallel
Architecture, Conceptual Semantics begins to offer a theoretical approach
to language processing that fits together nicely with findings in psycho-
linguistics (Jackendoff 2002, chapter 7), and lends itself to plausible
speculations about scenarios behind the evolution of the language capacity (Jackendo¨f 2002, chapter 8).

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

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

Jackendo¨f: I think this question is answered in part in my response to your first question. The culture-specific semantic properties you’ve mentioned concern how the word meanings fit into larger conceptual frames. Conceptual Semantics makes no principled distinction between the representations involved in sentence meanings and those involved in world knowledge. Therefore there is no principled stopping point where one says “this is word meaning and the rest is encyclopedic/world/knowledge/culture.” All of this information belongs to the same “representational module.”

Now, to answer the question more directly, Conceptual Semantics can’t explain conceptual differences due to culture-specific frames. These are explained by social history or some such. However, the theory can describe them, should we be concerned with that level of specificity in lexical
knowledge. In some recent work (Jackendoff forthcoming), I have explored where culture-specific knowledge enters in our understanding of codes of conduct, morality, rights, and obligations.

**Kecskes:** In your works, you adopt a mentalist approach to meaning. According to your conceptual semantics the world exists in the mind, it is brought into the mind through the various modes of sensory perception. Meaning expressed by language is thus connected to the world as it is conceptualized by the individual. However, individuals must tune their conceptualized worlds to those of other individuals in order to communicate effectively.

From a pragmatic perspective we could argue that world knowledge is available to interlocutors in two forms: as encapsulated in lexical items based on prior encounters and experience, and as provided by the actual situational context framed by the given situation (Kecskes 2003). Consequently, actual situational meaning is the result of the interaction of the two sides of world knowledge represented by the interlocutors (speaker and hearer) and the actual situational context. In the course of communication, the speaker actualizes his/her conventionalized cognitive contexts encoded in the lexical items to fulfill his/her communicative needs, attempting to match the requirements of the actual situational contexts and the needs of the hearer. The result of this effort is an utterance (utterances). The hearer internalizes the uttered linguistic context, that is, brings it into his/her mind, and matches it to his/her existing conventionalized, cognitive contexts. So the two prior “knowledges” (the knowledge of the speaker and the knowledge of the hearer) are matched to each other in an actual, “out there” context (situation). One of the prior “knowledges” is represented in the utterances of the producer (speaker) while the other is represented in the head of the processor (hearer) who matches the uttered contexts to his/her prior experience with similar contexts in a frame represented by the actual “out there” situation. **Do you think that this pragmatic model may be compatible in any way with your line of thinking?**

**Jackendoff:** Absolutely. I have been mostly concerned with the issue of what is in each individual’s head after the utterance takes place. Jackendoff 2002, sections 9.5 and 10.11, addresses some of the possible connections to the perspective you sketch.

I should say, though, that I think you take too lightly the idea of an “actual situational context.” Something functions as a situational context for a language user only insofar as he or she has conceptualized it as such. So we have to be concerned with what things in the environment are taken by language users to be relevant context, bringing us to a still
more deeply mentalist position. Within that proviso, I take your sketch to be entirely in concordance with Conceptual Semantics.

References