

ZOLTAN SZABO: THE CASE FOR COMPOSITIONALITY

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The starting-point:

C_0 =The meaning of a complex expression is a function of the meanings of its constituents and the way they are combined

How people generally think of Comp:

trivial, uncontroversial, high explanatory value, essential for semantic theory, and fundamental in semantic theory

Common objections to Comp based in perceived vagueness of NL:

Granted unconstrained syntax and rich meanings, Comp is adequate, and feasible, yet too vague to be of interest (Partee).

In NL, there is not a one-one correspondence between sentences and grammar, nor between sentences and meaning.

Recurring structural and lexical ambiguities, multiple meanings associated with one and same expression, several grammatical structures may correspond to single sentences.

scope ambiguity

ex. En ambassadör skickades ut till varje land.

En per land eller en enda till samtliga länder?

Russells reaction:

If a complex expression has only meaningful constituents then Compos holds, otherwise not.

Some expressions involve constituents that lack meaning. Hence NL is not compositional.

ex. def descriptions, quantifier phrases (see above)

Szabos reaction:

Linguistic meaning and structure are open-ended, we have to accept that.

The inherent vagueness of natural language is not sufficient reason to reject Compos.

Compos may hold nevertheless, in a less strict or alternative sense.

Szabo's objection to C₀: It contains three major ambiguities

1. is a function of
function= in loose sense: results from
function=in strong sense: is determined by (and by nothing else)

Szabo: The strong sense is required to explain linguistic change: There can be linguistic change because of compositionality.

Sentence S cannot change its meaning and reference unless something among its constituents and the way they are combined changes.

2. the meanings of its constituents
the meanings that the constituents of a complex expression has individually (summative, distributive)
the meanings that the constituents of a complex expression has collectively

Szabo: the strong reading shows that identity statements cannot both be informative and referential, the weak one does not

3. they
the way the constituents are combined
the way the meanings of the constituents are combined

Szabo: The second reading gives a place in semantic theory to, except for syntactic rules and constituent meanings, also semantic rules: the semantic rules determining the way the constituents' meanings are combined. The first reading has to appeal to hidden structures and unarticulated constituents etc. to explain differences in meaning.

Szabo is not certain which reading is preferable.

Szabo: Fixing the meaning of the principle of compositionality

condition of adequacy:

to not permit nonlexical or nonsyntactic sources of multiplicity of meaning of the complex expression

rationale:

Compositionality must determine meaning or it simply will be too weak;

To determine meaning is the very basis of compositionality, a *sine qua non*.

The principle of compositionality should not permit any other sources of meaning than lexical and syntactical ones.

C=The meaning of a complex expression is determined by the meanings its constituents have individually and of the way those constituents are combined

Szabo: C is the strongest AND the most natural reading.

From the rest of Szabo's paper, read and summarize on your own:

Arguments for C

--Understanding

and its varieties:

--Productivity

--Systematicity

Which are the arguments?

What does Szabo think about them, and why?

Strengthenings

--The philosopher's principle

Which is the principle?

What does Szabo think about it, and why?