Metalinguistic Disputes and Externalist Meaning

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Overview

Decomposition Thesis

(DT) Decomposition Thesis

The meaning of linguistic expressions can be decomposed into other meanings.

(ML) Metalinguistic Decomposition

Metalinguistic disputes are often about what constitutes the right, an adequate, or otherwise preferable decomposition of a linguistic expression.

Relativity of DT

The Decomposition Thesis can be relative to

- ...speakers who have different decompositions 'in mind'. *agent-relative* (DTA)
- ...languages, so words in a language have a lexical meaning given as a decomposition. *language-relative* (DTL)
- ...sociolects, jargon, groups, theories, attitudes, and so on.

ML is generally based on DTA. If ML disputes were always based on DTL, then all ML disputes would be descriptive. Yet, some of them are normative. Plunkett & Sundell (2013), Plunkett (2015), Plunkett (2019)

Two Examples

Athlete:
1. trained human with physical prowess in sports;
2. trained human or animal with physical prowess in sports.

Atom:
1. the smallest indivisible building blocks of nature, categorized into distinct elements with different weights;
2. small building blocks of nature with the characteristic properties of chemical elements and corresponding weights.

The athlete example is originally from Ludlow (2008).

Semantic Externalism I

Indexicalist Externalism

The meaning of [many/most/all?] linguistic expressions is (i) externally individuated and (ii) indexically fixed in relation to their extensions or the environment when the expression is first used. *e.g. Kripke, Putnam*

Patterns of Use Externalism / Network View

The meaning of [many/most/all?] linguistic expressions is (i) determined or (ii) given by the patterns of use of the expressions in different situations. *e.g. Lepore, Cappelen*

Semantic Externalism II

Social Externalism

(i) What an expression means is ultimately determined by experts.
(ii) 'Linguistic labor' can be deferred to experts. *Burge*

Anti-individualism, Externalism of Mental Representations

Meanings are not in the head. *e.g. Burge, Cappelen, Lepore*

Semantic Externalism III

- Semantic externalists generally defend a mix or all of these positions.
- Not all of the positions imply each other.
  - You can be a social externalist without being an anti-individualist.
  - You can be an indexicalist externalist without being a Patterns of Use Externalist, and vice versa.
- But: Indexicalist externalism implies anti-individualism, via Twin Earth arguments.

Idealizing Externalism as an Alternative?

Idealizing Externalism

(i) Meanings are idealized abstractions from mental representations.
(ii) Linguistic labor is often deferred to experts.

- The position is compatible with social externalism.
- It is externalist, because meanings are not in our heads.
- It rejects the conclusion of Twin Earth scenarios (no conclusion from possibility to actuality).
- It rejects externalism of mental representations.

Compatibility of DT with Externalism I

- DTL is incompatible with Indexicalist Externalism, because the decomposition does not represent the meaning of the expression, only our beliefs about the entities in question.

"Reverse Putnam" Example (cf. Putnam (1975))

We believe that Water is H2O. We discover that water is XYZ. So 'water' has always referred to XYZ, and that is so independently of the discovery.

Note: By the same token, indexicalist externalism is incompatible with social externalism, if the experts in the latter are taken to determine or define the meaning of expressions.

Compatibility of DT with Externalism II

- DTA and ML are incompatible with Indexicalist Externalism, Patterns of Use Externalism, and Anti-Individualism, because what individual speakers have in mind as the meaning of an expression does not constitute the meaning of an expression according to these positions. Substantive ML disputes are in reality world-level disputes (but maybe *substantive* ML disputes are rare).

This does not mean that ML disputes are fruitless, it just means that when these are substantive, then they are world-level disputes in disguise.

Compatibility of DT with Externalism III

- DT is compatible with social externalism. DTL is compatible, because the decomposition may be based on experts' opinions and usually is e.g. in dictionary definitions. DTA is compatible, because in an ML dispute speakers may also defer to experts and often do so, and individual speakers may also be experts, of course.

Social externalism is an unproblematic form of externalism.

The Analyticity Objection

This objection is based on Quine's *Two Dogmas of Empiricism* (1964).

DT seems to give rise to analytic judgments, but analyticity comes to a degree. As Quine points out, not only is analyticity dubious, there is an explanatory circle between Fregean meaning and the notion of analyticity that makes both of them ill-defined.

Should we give up DT?

- Giving up DT leads to implausible views about lexical semantics.
- Componential Analysis is based on various forms of semantic decompositions, regulated with respect to the proposed grammar formalism and the goals of the lexicon.
- It has a long tradition in linguistics, e.g. Goodenough (1956); Pottier (1964, 1992); Coseriu (1962, 1964, 1966); Jackendoff (1976, 1990, 2002); Katz (1972); Goddard (1998); Murphy (2010); Pustejovski (1995); Wierzbicka (1972, 1996).

Word Composition

- Some form of semantic decomposition is needed for the explanation of productive word composition processes.
  - ger. Betäubungsmittelverschreibungsgesetz: law for the prescription of narcotic substances
  - eng. saltiness: salt + y => salty + ness => saltiness
- Hybrid position: Compound words are composed, 'simple' words are primitive.
- The hybrid position is worse than giving up DT altogether, since it (i) does not solve the problem for compound words, and (ii) presumes a designated ontology of semantic primitives.

Against the Hybrid View

- It conflicts with Quine's arguments for ontological relativity (Quine 1960; 1969) by stipulating a designated ontology.
- It's not clear what counts as a semantic primitive. Why would *spiral* and *galaxy* be primitives but *spiral galaxy* not?
- Syntactic distinctions are not always mirrored semantically, since many composition processes are no longer productive. Compare *duvet* with *bedspread* and *eiderdown*.
- Semantic decomposition is needed for cross-linguistic studies. E.g. *river* is opposed to *stream* based on size, whereas French *rivière* is distinguished from *fleuve* by the condition that the former flows into the sea and the latter does not (Culler 1976).
- ML disputes occur about simple words like *athlete* and *democracy* just like they may occur about compound words. ('intuitive pull' towards ML/DTA)

What Is Semantic Decomposition?

Semantic decompositions can be used for many different purposes:

- a snapshot of everyday beliefs informed by experts *dictionary meaning*
- a snapshot of historical beliefs and beliefs of speaker communities *sociolects, e.g. "A whale is a very large fish living in the ocean."*
- a common-sense ontology given by lexical items, connected to a broader common sense ontology *encyclopedic knowledge*
- a representation of what a speaker believes a term means *ideolects*
- cross-linguistic studies of everyday meaning *e.g. fr. fleuve vs. eng. river*

  ⋮

Connection to Truth-conditional Meaning

Lexical meaning is not truth-conditional meaning.

- Normally when a word is used in a sentence, its meaning is not at issue.
- ML disputes are the exception, not the rule.
- Any decomposition is based on a fallible theory. (Water is H20, Atoms are smallest indivisible building blocks of nature, etc.)
- A semantic decomposition does not represent the truth-conditional contribution of an expression to a sentence as a whole.
- In Kaplan's (1989) terms, a decomposition neither enters the character nor semantic content of an expression.

Example 1

"Air is a gas composed of oxygen atoms."

- The sentence is false, of course.
- Whether atoms are divisible or not plays no role for the truth/falsity of the sentence.
- *atom* is used, not mentioned in the sentence, and the sentence is not about atoms, it is about the composition of air.
- Likewise for other terms like *gas*, *being composed of*, and *oxygen*.

Example 2

"Atoms can be split."

- The sentence is true.

"The smallest indivisible building blocks of nature can be split."

- The sentence is false.

Even though the theoretical adequacy of a semantic decomposition often does not matter (example 1), it can matter for the truth-conditions (example 2).

Why Decompositions Cannot Be TC-Relevant

- At best, a semantic decomposition can represent our best shot at current theorizing. Yet all theories are fallible and revisable.
- The purpose of semantic decompositions is often to represent everyday meaning, which tracks common beliefs of speakers about the entities the expressions stand for, often supplemented with expert advice.
- When an expression is used, its lexical meaning is often not at issue. Not the beliefs that enter a semantic decomposition count in the dispute, but *other* beliefs.
- Most of our beliefs are (probably) true, but semantic externalists typically defend their position with examples in which they are false. (arthritis, water, etc.)

Conclusions

- Semantic decompositions are indispensable for doing componential analysis in lexical semantics.
- They do not represent truth-conditional meaning and do not enter a representation of the truth-conditional content of a sentence in a truth-conditional semantic framework.
- A semantic decomposition based on our current best theory is the antirealist counter-part to an externalist conception of word meaning. Both are two sides of the same coin.
- For many purposes, DT is used to track common beliefs within a speaker community about the entities falling under an expression and not our current best theory.
- There is no good reason to think truth-conditional meaning is the only kind of meaning.

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