

Bridges to philosophy

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[AK Fest]

Angelika's nudge

Es wäre schön, wenn Du was beitragen könntest. Deine langjährige Zusammenarbeit mit Thony könnte ein gutes Beispiel für interdisziplinäre Arbeit mit Philosophen in der Zukunft sein.

Bridges

- Meet in the middle
- Cross to the other side

My path to semantics

Wilhelm Hittorf Gymnasium Münster

math, chemistry, *philosophy*

Universität Münster

English, *philosophy*, history of arts

Cambridge University

Romantic poetry, modernist novel, *philosophy*

Universität Köln

English, linguistics, *philosophy*

Seeds

Aristotle → **William of Sherwood**

ancient & medieval logic and semantics

Quine

Word and Object

Eco

The Name of the Rose

Horn

On the semantic properties of logical operators in English

Keenan & Faltz

Boolean semantics for natural language

Barwise & Cooper

“Generalized quantifiers and natural language”

Did I leave philosophy behind?

UMass

- Angelika
- Barbara
- Emmon

A lingering interest in philosophical questions might lead to occasional fruitful interactions with philosophers, and maybe even productive collaborations. But that's not quite the story here.

Some recent articles on my pile

- Decision-theoretic relativity in deontic modality
- Strict conditional accounts of counterfactuals
- Three notions of dynamicness in language
- Probabilities of conditionals in context
- Will done Better: Selection Semantics, Future Credence, and Indeterminacy

- Type-Ambiguous Names
- 'The' Problem for the-Predicativism
- Agentive Modals
- Know-How and Gradability
- Nonfactual Know-How and the Boundaries of Semantics
- The Pragmatics of Slurs
- Elusive Counterfactuals !

WTF?

Outside semantics, who else in linguistics has to keep checking philosophy journals?

I don't mean the occasional glance at meta-stuff

How come philosophers are doing semantics, publishing semantics papers?

Phonologists don't have to deal with this.

One view of the history

Semantics is the study of the meanings conveyed with language.

Until there was a science of language, anybody could do semantics.

So, everybody did.

Formal semantics was born out of philosophers/logicians becoming impatient with the idea that natural language meaning cannot be captured with formal logical tools.

The big steps

- (i) free/intuitive translation from natural language to logic
- (ii) compositional semantics that works off the syntactic structure of natural language (Montague, Lewis)
- (iii) linguists (Partee, Dowty, ...) bringing this idea into linguistics proper

Two ways to do semantics

- Take morpho-syntax seriously. Take cross-linguistic variation and patterns seriously. Take compositionality seriously.
- Focus on the meanings conveyed and not necessarily on how precisely they are conveyed compositionally.

Stalnaker “Pragmatics” (1970)

I shall consider semantics to be the study of propositions.

Propositions are things that may be considered in abstraction on the one hand from particular languages and linguistic formulations (the sentences that express them), and on the other hand from the kinds of linguistic acts in which they figure (for example the assertions and commands in which a proposition is asserted or commanded).

semantics [...] has no essential connection with languages at all

How philosophers keep doing semantics

- Often, morpho-syntactic, cross-linguistic, and sometimes even compositionality considerations can be set aside.
- Even if they are not put aside, one can do semantics to some extent without diving deeply into these issues.
- Crucial: the fundamentals can be learned from a very accessible textbook.

Blackwell Texts

*Semantics
in Generative
Grammar*



*Irene Heim &
Angelika Kratzer*



Why they keep doing it

- Semanticists are not engaged with philosophical concerns.
- Philosophers are interested in limitations of expressive power.
- Semantic questions arise that have not yet been answered by semanticists.

What's in it for linguistic semantics

- The benefits of another perspective
- Similar formal tools can serve both semantics and other inquiries (formal epistemology, meta-ethics, metaphysics).
- Questions that go beyond compositional semantics.
- More person-hours devoted to issues we care about.

One way to deal with this

As semanticists, we ask

- what does X mean?
- exactly how does X manage to mean what it means?

Often, we can outsource the first question to philosophy.

Is the situation stable?

- Semanticists are unlikely to address philosophical questions.
- But maybe more of semantics will be left to semanticists.
- Common trajectory of philosophy spinning off special sciences.
- Philosophy of X, rather than X

Quoth Austin (Ibs and cans)

In the history of human inquiry, philosophy has the place of the initial central sun, seminal and tumultuous: from time to time it throws off some portion of itself to take station as a science, a planet, cool and well regulated, progressing steadily towards a distant final state.

Quoth Austin (Ifs and cans)

This happened long ago at the birth of mathematics, and again at the birth of physics: only in the last century we have witnessed the same process once again, slow and at the time almost imperceptible, in the birth of the science of mathematical logic.

Quoth Austin (Ifs and cans)

Is it not possible that the next century may see the birth, through the joint labours of philosophers, grammarians, and numerous other students of language, of a true and comprehensive science of language? Then we shall have rid ourselves of one more part of philosophy (there will still be plenty left) in the only way we ever can get rid of philosophy, by kicking it upstairs.

My outlook

- I think the collaboration is fruitful and beneficial.
- We should continue to be an active part of it.

Venues

- Linguistics & Philosophy ... the journal
- Linguistics & Philosophy ... my department

Partners in crime (in philosophy)

- Coauthor: Thony Gillies
- Colleagues: Bob Stalnaker, Steve Yablo, Justin Khoo

Students on the philosophy side

- Delia Graff Fara
- Eric Swanson
- Sarah Moss
- Seth Yalcin
- Dilip Ninan
- Bernard Nickel

- Matt Mandelkern
- Ginger Schultheis
- Kevin Dorst
- David Boylan
- Milo Phillips-Brown

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