Inherently Meaningful Structures: What they are and why we need them

It is widely accepted in philosophy that linguistic expressions are not inherently meaningful – according to the standard view, they only become meaningful if they are interpreted in accordance with the semantic rules of a language. This gives rise to the question of what it is in virtue of which the expressions of languages have their representational content. Frege argued that the content of linguistic expressions as well as thoughts is provided by senses, which are entities in a third realm. Yet, in turn, it remains mysterious where these third realm entities are supposed to have their content from. Assuming senses just seems to defer the problem one step rather than solving it (cf. Fodor 1998: 17-20).

The idea that the meanings of natural language sentences are structured propositions, developed by Soames and Salmon in the 1980s faces a similar challenge: In this tradition, propositions are taken to be n-tuples of objects. Yet it remains unclear how n-tuples of objects are supposed to have truth conditions or modal properties, and what ensures the special kind of unity which propositions as opposed to mere lists of words exhibit. There does not seem to be an inherent relation between, say, the structure of a set theoretic expression like *{the property of swimming, Dara}* and the meaning of *Dara swims*. Such a relation can only be provided by interpreting the structure in a certain way. But then it is the interpretation which gives meaning to the structure; its meanigfulness is, thus, not an inherent property of the structure. King (2007; 2009), followed by Soames (2010b; 2010a; forthcoming), therefore proposes to reverse the traditional Fregean order of explanation: according to them, propositions inherit their representational properties from the inherently meaningful cognitive activities of agents. According to Soames' account, which I shall mainly be concerned with in this paper, propositions are types of cognitive events the instances of which are agents' predicating something of something else. The proposition that snow is white then is an event type such that its tokens are all the predications of whiteness of snow (Soames 2010b: 103). According to Soames (2010b: 3), these types are abstractions from their tokens. Therefore, 'the representationality, and hence truth conditions, of the propositions are due to the representational features of these possible instances' (Soames forthcoming: 9).

Although I agree that an explanation of the representational character of language and thought has to be located in cognition rather than in a mysterious third realm, I argue that Soames' account is still problematic: Taking propositions to be abstractions of cognitive events does not allow for a criterion of which cognitive acts are predications and which are not. Such a criterion has to be structural. Yet, in that case the relevant structures cannot be mere abstractions. Furthermore, mere abstractions do not allow for a principled account of which tokens of mental activity fall under the same type and, hence, express the same proposition. Such an account, again, presupposes that types are explanatorily prior to their tokens (cf. Collins 2011, ch. 6.6). In a sense, Soames seems to commit himself to the explanatory priority of types over tokens and hence of structures over their instantiations by assuming that predication is both a type of cognitive activity and an explanatory primitive. But then the question arises again in virtue of what this structure is meaningful. Assuming that its meaningfulness is again due to an interpretation yields a regress. I therefore suggest reconsidering the claim that there are no inherently meaningful structures and, based on recent work on natural language grammar, I argue that there is good reason for assuming that some cognitive structures are indeed inherently meaningful.

It has recently been suggested that a strict distinction between syntax and semantics, familiar from formal languages, does not apply to natural languages (Hinzen 2006, ch. 5; Mukherji 2010, ch. 3). One argument towards this conclusion is that the grammar of natural language expressions is an empirical matter and is, thus, not open to stipulation – in contrast to the syntax of formal languages. Yet, since our linguistic utterances do not come with phonological, morphological, or grammatical structure written on their sleeves, the only way of uncovering such structure is by considering the relation between sound and meaning. The assumption of grammatical structure, thus, is in many cases assumed to *explain* the relation between sound and meaning. A certain sound pattern may, for example, be ambiguous. If the ambiguity is not lexical, it often can be explained by the different grammatical structures the respective kind of utterance can have. But grammar also explains negative facts: why sound patterns do not exhibit certain readings or are not ambiguous. For instance, the fact that *The president called the senator from Texas* has exactly two readings

(according to which the senator or the call is from Texas, respectively) but not a third one (according to which the president is from Texas) (Pietroski 2005: 257), is explained by the fact that grammar allows certain syntactic derivations (corresponding to the two possible readings) but not others. Of course, we could now go on by assuming a semantic structure which the grammatical one is mapped to and which interprets the grammatical structure. But since such an additional structure would in the relevant respects have to be isomorphic to the grammatical one, it does not add anything to our understanding of these aspects of meaning.

Yet, why should we believe that grammar is inherently meaningful? What provides the inherent link between a grammatical structure and its meaning? I only know of one possible answer to these questions which has the desired result: The relation between the structure and its meaning is a biological one – grammatical structures themselves, then, have to be taken as natural objects (cf. Chomsky 2000). Such an assumption is, of course, not uncontroversial, since it is in conflict with the view that language is a conventional system, which is the probably most prominent view in current philosophy of language. I, nonetheless, shall make no attempt to defend the idea that grammatical structures are natural objects here. My only concern in this paper is that taking language as a natural object provides an answer to the considered problem.

What difference taking language as a natural object makes to our question becomes perhaps clear by comparing it to other biological structures like that of the DNA. In principle, a DNA sequence could be mapped to anything. As Hinzen (2006: 229) remarks 'You can map any DNA sequence of an organism to bottles and pancakes. The question is why you should. The DNA codes for the proteins it codes for, playing a particular causal role in an organismic process.' Similarly, grammatical structures have such a biological function in our mental live, if they are natural objects. The link between the code and what it encodes may not be of logical necessity, but is ensured by the way our cognition works, on that view. Hence, if language (or whatever structure is described by grammatical theory) is a natural object, there are inherently meaningful structures which could serve to naturalize propositions.

At the inception of analytic philosophy, a problem closely related to the one just discussed was the question in virtue of what the words of a sentence express a proposition and thus exhibit a certain unity which a mere list of the same words lacks (cf. Gaskin 2008). According to Soames (2010b: 106), this question is a 'pseudo-problem': the unity of the proposition is simply the result of predicating something of something else. Yet, since Soames takes predication as an explanatory primitive, his solution to the unity question is merely stipulative. As Davidson (2005: 77) argues: 'It is just this unity [of the proposition] that a theory of predication must explain'. But even given the stipulation, the unity problem comes back to haunt Soames. As argued above, Soames fails to explain how tokens (of mental acts) fall under certain types. Yet, since Plato, the relation between types and tokens (or universals and their instances) is just the metaphysical version of the unity problem. The 'pseudo-problem', thus, remains as a real problem – and I have made no attempt to solve it in this paper. Conversely, the problem of how structures are related to their meaning, the question which Soames (2010b: 29) calls 'the real problem', finds its solution in biology, if the account above is on the right track – it may thus not be a real problem.

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