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NEW PERSPECTIVES ON COMPOSITIONALITY: KIT FINE'S SEMANTIC RELATIONIST APPROACH TO MEANING. AN EXPOSITORY ESSAY

Abstract. The paper is an expository essay in which I run an assessment of compositionality from the vantage point of Kit Fine's semantic relationist approach to meaning. This relationist view is deepening our conception about how the meanings of propositions depend not only on the semantic features and roles of each separate meaningful unit in a complex, but also on the relations that those units hold to each other. The telling feature of the formal apparatus of this Finean relationist syntax and semantics, *viz.* the coordination scheme, has some unexpected consequences that will emerge against the background of an analogy with the counterpart theoretic semantics for modal languages. In the evaluation of a *de re* modal formula at a world in a counterpart theoretic model, as opposed to the evaluation in a possible world semantic model, one may choose different possible objects as referents or semantic values of two tokens of a single type individual constant or individual variable. Likewise, in the relationist semantics for variables or individual constants (proper names), within a coordination schema one may choose different objects if the variables or the constants are not strictly coordinated. I shall leave the working out of this comparison for a future paper. The program defends 'referentialism' in philosophy of language; Fine holds that semantic relations that have to be added to the assigned intrinsic values in our semantic theory, especially the relation which he calls 'coordination', can do much of the work of (Fregean) sense. A relationist referentialism has certain important explanatory virtues which it shares with the Fregean position, but the former is better off ontologically than the latter, since it is not committed to the existence of sense.

Keywords: compositionality, semantic relationist approach, referentialism, Kit Fine

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The paper is an expository essay in which I address some of Kit Fine's views about meaning, which essentially consists in a relationist stance about the meaning of individual variables under assignments, and of names, respectively.

Let's consider a version of Frege's puzzle concerning identity sentences. Take the identity sentences: (i) Cicero = Cicero and (ii) Cicero = Tully, in which the two names, *viz.* "Cicero" and "Tully", are coreferential.

The semantic puzzle of identity sentences is based upon the following assumptions:

(1) *Semantic difference*: The two identity sentences are semantically different.

(2) *Compositionality*: If the sentences are semantically different, then the names "Cicero" and "Tully" are semantically different.

(3) *Referential Link*: If the names "Cicero" and "Tully" are semantically different, then they are referentially different.

(4) *Referential Identity*: The names "Cicero" and "Tully" are not referentially different.

Thus, what the puzzle indicates is that the four assumptions are jointly inconsistent, and we should give up at least one of them. Of course, the challenge is: Which one? And why?

In the literature, there have been two main responses to the puzzle, *viz.*

A. the Fregean response; and
B. the Referentialist response.

Both responses accept *Compositionality* and *Referential Identity*.

The Fregeans accept *Semantic Difference* between (i) and (ii); they reject *Referential Link* through the distinction between sense and reference: if two names are semantically different it doesn't follow that they are referentially different. The Referentialists accept *Referential Link*; they reject *Semantic Difference*: there is no semantic difference between (i) and (ii). Nobody doubts (4) – the *Referential Identity*.

Current philosophical thinking on Frege's puzzle has reached an impasse, for the dialectics of the arguments support a set of strong

arguments and Fregean intuitions in favor of *Semantic Difference*, but nevertheless some other argumentative strategy supports another set of strong intuitive arguments in favor of *Referential Link*. And fact is that there is no apparent way to choose between them. This is why I believe that finding a solution to this conflict and giving an account for both sets of intuitions in a sort of unified way, is the main task of a general semantic theory.

Kit Fine's semantic relationism seems to be that kind of approach that we need here.

Its basic view consists in the idea that there may be irreducible semantical or representational relationships between expressions or elements of thought, ones that are not reducible to the intrinsic semantic features of the expressions or elements of thought themselves between which they hold.

Semantic relationism motivates the view that we should give up (2); this means that we should dispense with (a crude version of) compositionality. In general, this is perceived as a huge price to pay. However, Fine convincingly argues that there is also a benefit if we make this move, which is that semantic relationism takes on board the sets of intuitions that separate Fregeans from referentialists; for then, in dealing with Frege's puzzle of identity sentences we can retain cognitive difference (as Fregeans do) and the referential link (as the referentialists do).

But what rejection of *Compositionality* amounts to? It amounts to supporting the view that there is a semantic difference between the two identity sentences, even though there is no semantic difference between coreferential names. So, after all, we do not reject the general idea of a compositional semantics. According to Fine, what fails is the so-called intrinsicalist component of *Compositionality*, whose requirement is that there be no difference in semantic relationship without a difference in semantic feature. In the end of the day, semantic relationism rejects intrinsicalism, and not compositionality *per se*.

Thus, semantic relationists accept (with Fregeans) that there is a semantic difference between identity sentences. They block the inference licensed by *Compositionality*, which has it that since there is a semantic difference between the sentences, it should also be a semantic difference between the names. Instead, the inference that one can validly draw

from here is that there is a semantic difference between the pairs of names "Cicero", "Cicero", and "Cicero", "Tully".

Is there a more profound rationale for supporting this view of the meaning of names?

At this juncture, it is worth taking a look at a similar semantic phenomenon which involves the variables of a first-order language. Here we have an analogy with Russell's puzzle of the variable. This puzzle emerges from the following considerations: the semantic role of two distinct variables in two distinct expressions, *viz.* "x > 0" and "y > 0", is the same; whereas, the semantic role of the two variables within one expression, *viz.* "x > y", is different, since "x > x" would be a very different statement.

The idea of this relationist semantics is this: the semantic role of the individual variable is given by the range of values the variable can take; however, this is not going to settle the issue of whether several variables can take any value together. That requires an independent specification. While each of x and y can take any value from the domain, it might or might not be that both can take any particular value simultaneously.

So, how are we going to fix the problem?

> "We must allow that any two variables will be semantically the same, even though pairs of identical and of distinct variables are semantically different; and we should, in general, be open to the possibility that the meaning of the expressions of a language is to be given in terms of their semantic relationship to one another." (Fine 2009, 24)

In the end of the day, Fine rejects semantical intrinsicalism for variables as well. Thus, in addition to specifying the values each single variable can range over, if taken on its own, one should also specify which values several variables can take, if taken together. So, one core tenet of semantic relationism is that from the specification of a range of values for individual variables it does not follow which values the variables can simultaneously take. But if this is so, then it is clear that the intrinsicalist doctrine, *viz.* no difference in semantic relationship without a difference in semantic feature, will fail.

The overall relationist – and anti-intrinsicalist – moral that emerges from this analysis is that it is only by giving up the intrinsicalist doctrine,

plausible as it initially appears to be, that Russell's antinomy of the variable is to be solved. There are situations in which things can only be distinguished in terms of their relations to one another, and not only in terms of their intrinsic features.

This semantic and philosophical discussion brings along a new relational view of variables, and a new relational semantics for the language of first-order logic. The aim of the semantics, as standardly conceived, is to assign a semantic value to each (meaningful) expression of the language under consideration. The aim of a relational semantics is to assign a semantic connection to each sequence of expressions.

The connection is meant to encapsulate (i) the semantic features of each individual expression and (ii) the semantic relationships between the expressions. The semantic connections replace the semantic values as the principal objects of semantic enquiry. This notion of a semantic connection is a generalization of the notion of a value range for a variable, that is of the set of values the variable can take.

Now, after making this analogy between names and variables the issue is: can we make use of the semantic relationist view of variables as an analogy for developing a semantics for names, as well?

In passing from variables to names there is one major obstacle, though! There is a crucial difference between variables and names: in the case of variables "x" and "x" take coordinated values; whereas the variables "x" and "y" take their values independently of each other. On the other hand, in the case of names, however, the semantic role of each coreferential name is already fixed, and so "coordination" or "independence" do not seem appropriate here.

If there is a way in which *Semantic Relationism* works for names, then in that case we should have the following situation: the referentialist assumption, *i.e.* there is no semantic difference between "Cicero" and "Tully", is compatible with there existing a semantic difference between the pairs of names "Cicero", "Cicero", and "Cicero", "Tully".

To come up with an explanation for this, semantic relationists will have to reject a crude principle of *Compositionality*, that one which incorporates Intrinsicality, and consequently to argue that a semantic difference between the pairs of names need not imply a semantic difference between the names themselves.

But what would be the rationale for that rejection? For the difference in meaning between the two identity sentences to exist, there should exist a semantic relationship between "Cicero" and "Cicero" that does not hold between "Cicero" and "Tully". And what is noteworthy is that this property of the semantic relationship per se be not grounded in an intrinsic difference between the names themselves.

Now, Fine's suggestion is to differentiate between the pair of names "Cicero", "Cicero", and the pair "Cicero", "Tully" along the following lines: (i) in the former case, the pair of names represents the object both *as being the same*, and *as the same*; (ii) in the latter case, the pair of names represents the object **only** *as being the same* and **not** *as the same*.

But when does a pair of names represent the object as the same? The answer seems to be that in the first case, as opposed to the second, it is part of how the names represent their objects that the object should be the same. In the first case, it is a strong semantic requirement that "Cicero" and "Cicero" are coreferential. In the second case, however, it is just a fact that "Cicero" and "Tully" corefer.

The former case is stronger than the latter. The suggestion is that a pair of names represents the object as the same when the relationship that holds between the two names in the pair is such that they strictly corefer (a semantic requirement that their reference should be the same). So, for two names to represent an object as the same is for them strictly to corefer. Two names strictly corefer, if it is a semantic fact that they corefer.

To sum up this, two expressions will represent an object as the same, if it is a semantic fact that they represent the same object. Now, we have a semantic relationist explanation of Frege's puzzle: in general, there is an incompatibility between representing objects informatively as being the same and representing them as the same. Even though there is no semantic difference between "Cicero" and "Tully", there is a semantic difference between the pairs of names "Cicero", "Cicero", and "Cicero", "Tully". Only in the first pair the names strictly corefer, in virtue of a semantic fact, whereas in the second pair they corefer in virtue of just how things are.

References

Fine, Kit (2009). *Semantic Relationism*. Wiley-Blackwell.

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