*Philosophy of Language: Revisiting Events Semantics*

Friederike Moltmann

Université Côte d’Azur

Fall 2023

**Handout 1**

**Introduction:**

**Preliminaries on Events, Ontology, Semantics, and Syntax**

**1. Preliminaries on Events**

**1.1. General intuitions about events**

Linguistically reflected intuitions about events

1. Referential expressions used to refer to events
2. Other ways of talking about events

Examples of event terms

Deverbal nominalizations describing events

(1) a. John’s walk, the invasion of the Ukraine, the demonstration against war, the negotioation

b. the end of the negotiation, the beginning of the negotiation

Why deverbal nominalizations? Because verbs describe events

But in what sense? Different views ….

Underived event nouns

(3) war, fire, kiss, party, ceremony, protest, scream (?)

Event sortals

(2) event, process, state, situation

**1.2. What types of properties characterize events?**

Events bear a close connection to time

1. Events are in time

Temporal predicates:

(4) a. the protest yesterday

b. the rain last night

(5) a. The ceremony was yesterday.

b. The start of the negotiations was this morning.

(6) a. ? The accident was an hour ago.

b. ?? The rain was yesterday.

Parameter involved:

Planned events vs. spontaneous events?

2. Events have temporal parts

Linguistic diagnostics for part structures:

Application of part-related expressions: *part of, all of, partially*

(7) a. Part of the walk was difficult. (temporal part)

b. Part of the apple is red. (spatial part)

Relation of events to space

Location in space, sometime changeable location in space

(8) a. The meeting took place in another room.

b. The meeting moved to another room  
 c. ?? The rain moved to the south of the country.

d. The hurricane moved to the south of the coast.

Spatial parts of at least some events:

(9) a. Part of the war took place in the south of the country.

b. Part of the couple’s walk was on the left side of the road.

**1.3. Existence predicates for events**

(10) a. The house existed for years.

b. ??? The accident existed yesterday.

Restrictions on *occur* and *happen*:

(11) a. The accident occurred / happened yesterday.

b. ??? The rain occurred / happened yesterday.

c. The rain lasted for hours.

**1.4. The sortal noun *event***

Restrictions on the applicability of the noun *event*:

(12) a. the event of the outbreak of the war

b. The outbreak of the war was an event that shocked everyone.

c. ??? the event of the rain / of the laughter / the walk

**1.5. Events and related entities**

Events and processes

outbreak of the war vs. rain

Events and states

war vs. the state of war

Existence predicates for states

(13) The state of war still obtains / ??? is taking place.

‘Eventuality’:

cover term for events and states

Events and actions

Are actions just events or should one distinguish the two, also for semantic purposes?

Acts and attitudinal objects

Acts of claiming vs. claims

Acts of speaking vs. speeches

Tropes (particularized properties)

The redness of the apple (trope) vs. the apple’s being red (state)

Situations

The situation of John’s being in France

‘Situation’ primarily used as a term in semantic theory for parts of worlds playing certain semantic roles (situations as a replacement of possible worlds)

‘Situation’ used also as a cover term for events, states, actions, tropes etc. – a good idea?

**1.6. The real importance of events for semantics**

Not events as referents of event-referring NPs, but events described by verbs

Davidsonian event semantics

Verbs as predicates of events

The Davidsonian view:

*Walk* expresses a relation between events and agents: walk(e, John) ‘e is a walking by John’

(14) a. John walked slowly.

b. There is an event e, walk(e, John) and slowly(e) and and e is past the utterance.

Challenges for Davidsonian event semantics

1. Justification of implicit arguments and of existential quantification over events

2. Applicability of to all adverbials?

3. Further applications: complex predicates, decomposition of predicates, plurals, …

-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

**2. Ontology, Syntax and Semantics – General Notions and Issues**

**2.1. The branches (subdisciplines) of linguistics and philosophy**

Linguistics

Syntax: the study of the structure of sentences

Semantics: the study of the meaning of sentences

Lexical semantics: the study of the meaning of words

Philosophy

Metaphysics

Philosophy of language, epistemology, ethics, philosophical logic, philosophy of science, …

Natural language ontology

Part of semantics and part of metaphysics, a subdiscipline of both linguistics and philosophy

**2.2. What are meanings?**

Lexical semantics

Meanings as concepts (in the mind) or properties (properties objects actually have)

Words that *act as* predicates:

one-place predicates: *house, man, tree, walk*

two-place predicate: *brother, friend,*

three-place predicates: *give* (*John gave Mary a book*)

Meanings and *extensions*

Extension of predicates: made up from the things the predicates are true of.

Extension of one-place predicates: sets of entities

Extension of two place predicates: two-place relations between entities

Extension of three-place predicates: three-place relations between entities

Extension of names: individuals bearing the name

Extension of sentences: truth values (Frege)

The standard view: meanings determines extensions

Standard formal semantics

Identification of meanings with a mapping (function) from *circumstances* (worlds, perhaps times) to extensions 🡪 *possible-world semantics*

Sentences are true or false relative to circumstances (possible worlds, perhaps times)

Identification of *the meaning of a sentence* with the set of circumstances in which the sentence is true.

Proper names

Do they have conceptual meanings?

Older view: property, cluster of properties identifying the bearer if the name

Current view (due to Kripke):

Proper names just stand for individuals (direct reference)

**2.3. Ontology**

1. Ontology as a discipline

2. Ontology as the subject matter of a discipline: ‘An ontology consists of entities of various sorts’

*Entities*: anything there is

Kinds of entities

*Objects*: material objects, artifacts, abstract objects,

contrast with events, modes, situations, and times

*Events* and *states*

*Modes* (or *tropes*): e.g. Mary’s happiness, Socrates’ wisdom

*Times*

*(Possible) situations* and *worlds*

*Individual*: often used as synonymous with ‘entity’, with ‘object’, or in contrast with ‘stuff’

*Stuff, matter, substance, quantity*: denotation of typical mass nouns (*water, clay, wood*)

Characterizations of metaphysics

Aristotle

Metaphysics as the study of ‘being qua being’:

deals with the most general nature of things

deals with the most general categories of entities

Another type of characterization

Plato: ‘Carves nature at its joints’

Deals with the most general, fundamental nature of reality

An important issue:

It is not obvious how *reality* itself should be conceived:

Fundamental reality

- Collection of physical objects that are independent of our mind

- Amorphous mass, which has yet to be carved out by mental or linguistic activities

More plenitudinous views of reality:

- Reality includes derivative entities like smiles, shadows, modes

- Reality includes mind-dependent objects, objects individuated in terms of their function, e.g. artifacts of various sorts

Ontology vs metaphysics

Distinguishing metaphysics and ontology

Metaphysics deals with *the nature of things*

e.g. metaphysics of time and space, of causation, of modality,

Ontology deals with *what there is*:

e.g. the question of what categories of entities there are

More recent use of ontology

Use of the term ‘ontology’ in the sense of ‘metaphysics’

Often when applied to a particular domain:

Applied ontology, social ontology, ontology of art, ontology of biology, ontology of ordinary objects

Ontology / metaphysics focused on what is reflected in natural language

The study of the categories of entities and their nature as reflected in natural language.

Two terms for that branch of metaphysics

‘Natural language metaphysics’: Emmon Bach and others

‘Natural language ontology’: my own choice (and that of others)

Reasons for that choice:

1. ‘Ontology’ can be used for the subject matter of natural language ontology.

The subject matter of natural language ontology:

The ontology of natural language or the ontology implicit in natural language:

2. ‘Ontology’ as a count noun permits the plural.

This is needed when talking about:

- ‘different ontologies for different languages’

- ‘different ontologies for different parts of language’

- ‘different ontologies for language and cognition’, etc

The apparent involvement of ontology in natural language

Reference with referential NPs

Simple case:

(1) Mary is happy:

Standard view:

Speaker refers to an individual with the utterance of *Mary* and predicates the property of happiness of her.

Simple subject-predicate sentences:

Truth conditions obtained by referring to things and predicating properties of them.

Quantification

(2) There are things John said.

Anaphora

Anaphoric reference to worlds / situations

(3) a. John might come. *Then / In that case,* I would come too.

Anaphoric reference to times:

(3) b. John opened the door. *Then* Mary entered.

Implicit arguments

Arguments of predication that are not also objects of reference (of referential NPs):

Best known case: *Davidsonian events*, i.e. implicit event arguments of verbs

Needed for the semantics of adverbials:

(4) a. John walked slowly.

b. There is a walking event which has John as agent and which is slow.

Same motivation for modes (tropes) as implicit arguments of adjectives:

(5) a. Mary is profoundly happy.

b. There is a mode (trope) of happiness of Mary that is profound.

Ontological categories reflected in syntactic categories

Events – verbs / nominalizations of verbs

(6) John’s walk / laughter / birth

Modes – adjectives / nominalizations of adjectives

(7) Mary’s wisdom / happiness / carelessness

Ontological categories reflected in syntactic constructions

*That*-clauses used to refer to states of affairs and facts:

(8) a. That it will rain is likely.

b. That it rained was surprising.

Two sorts of gerunds (Zeno Vendler):

Fact reference with ‘imperfect nominals’

(9) a. John’s singing the song was unusual.

Event reference with ‘perfect nominals’:

(9) b. John singing of the song was unusual.

Why is ontology needed for doing semantics?

Entities are obviously involved in various ways in the semantics of natural language.

Ontology is needed for a *compositional semantics*, given standard views: reference, quantification, predication, modification, …

Scepticism about the involvement of ontology in semantics

Semantics cannot really involve ontology, i.e. the ontology of real things.

Things like holes, mistakes, problems, nuances, groups, etc. play the very same role in the semantics of sentences, but they are not real things on many philosophers’ views.

Should semanticists be making philosophical claims about what there is when doing their work? Or are semanticists perhaps entirely in error in what they are doing when positing entities for the purpose of compositional semantics?

Three types of positions

1. A common stance among semanticists: *agnosticism*

Semanticists should posit entities as semantic values for the purpose of compositional semantics without worrying about their metaphysical (or even cognitive) status (e.g. Emmon Bach)

2. Chomsky’s *extreme skepticism* regarding the involvement of ontology in semantics:

Semantics does not involve reference to real entities at all, i.e. entities in a mind-independent world. Therefore, semantics can concern itself with cognitive representations, and thus another level of syntax. (Chomsky’s arguments and examples to be discussed in detail later in the semester!)

3. A third view (Kit Fine, myself): *two-level ontology*

For the purpose of compositional semantics, semantics should posit entities that contribute to truth conditions, but that need not be regarded as fundamental

It is another task, that of *foundationalist metaphysics*, to explain those entities in more fundamental terms.

Two levels of ontology:

- The ontology reflected in linguistic data or the ‘ontology of appearances’ (Kit Fine)

- The ontology of the fundamental.

A closely related distinction to that between natural language ontology and foundationalist metaphysics:

Strawson’s distinction between *descriptive metaphysics* and *revisionary metaphysics*.

**2.4. Connections between ontology and syntax**

The notion of a referential NP and of a predicate

‘Referential NP (DP)’ and ‘predicate’ are syntactic roles.

Semantic roles need to be syntactically identified.

Referential NPs: *the man, John, that man, a certain man*

Frege:

Referential NPs (‘names’) serve to stand for *objects*.

Objects are what referential NPs stand for.

Presuppose the existence of their referent.

Contrast with quantificational, predicative, and intensional NPs:

(10) a. John did not see a unicorn.

b. Charlie is not a unicorn.

c. John is looking for a unicorn.

Semantics of predicates:

- attribute property to an entity (ontology of properties)

- apply to entities to yield truth values.

Syntactic categories and ontological categories

Verbs (and deverbal nominalizations) – events and states

Adjectives (and deadjectival nominalizations) – modes (and tropes)

Nouns ? Languages without syntactic category distinctions?

The mass-count distinction

Mass-count distinction is a syntactic distinction with semantic content

(12) a. one piece of wood, mane pieces of wood

b. a single statue, many statues

c. \*one wood, \* a single wood, \* many wood

Semantic content of the mass-count distinction as an ontological distinction?

Being an individual, being one vs being neither one nor many (being a ‘quantity’)

Plurals

Plural as a syntactic category with apparent ontological content

(13) a. John and Mary met.

b. The students gathered.

c. The students are ten.

Dominant view in semantics

Definite plurals stand for sums of entities (Link and others)

Thus, sums of individuals are part of the ontology of natural language.

Alternative: definite plurals stand for several entities at once (‘plural reference’)

Part-whole relations

The partitive construction

(14) a. part / some of the apple

b. part / some of the students

c. part / some of the wood

Natural language appears to display an ontology of individuals, sums, and quantities, all ordered by part relations.

Light verbs

Light verbs: *have, make, give, be*

Light verbs may convey ontological relations

Ontological dependence:

(16) The sweater has a hole.

Causative structures

(17) a. John made Mary happy

b. John made a request.

What sorts of linguistic data reflect the ontology of natural language?

Why did we look at syntactic features and categories and not lexical meaning, especially not of ontological terms?

Not all linguistic ‘data’ reflect the ontology implicit in natural language:

Ontological assertions

(18) a. There are events.

b. There are numbers

c. There are abstract objects

The use of sortals in general?

(19) the event of rain

Generalization

The ontology implicit in natural language is reflected in

1. Syntactic categories and features, perhaps syntactic positions

2. Implicit arguments (events)

3. Syntactic constructions, e.g. nominal constructions for different types of entities.

But not in its philosophical vocabulary.

-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

**Recommended readings on natural language ontology in general**

Bach, E., 1986, “Natural Language Metaphysics,” in R. Barcan Marcus et al. (eds), *Logic,*

*Methodology, and Philosophy of Science* VI , Amsterdam: North Holland, pp. 573-595.

Moltmann, F., 2017, “[Natural Language Ontology](http://www.friederike-moltmann.com/uploads/Natural%20Language%20Ontology-2016(1).docx)'.” Oxford Research *Encyclopedia of*

*Linguistics.* Oxford UP, New York.

---------------, 2022: “[Natural Language Ontology](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/natural-language-ontology/),“ Stanford Encyclopedia of

Philosophy, online