

*Philosophy of Language: Natural Language Ontology*

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**Handout 10**

## **The Chomskyan Challenges to Referentialist Semantics 2**

### **1. Paul Pietroski's elaboration of the Chomskyan view of meaning**

The view of semantic internalism (Chomsky, Pietroski)

Semantics cannot be about the relation between expressions and things in the world, but only about another level of representation, that of (complex) conceptual structure.

Point of departure

Nouns like *book*, *county* (country names), *window* are polysemous.

Some predicates apply to one concept, other to another concept.

- (1) a. The book is heavy, but it is interesting.  
       b. France is hexagonal, and it is a republic.  
       c. John entered through the window after breaking it.

Book: material object – content

Country: geographical region – social organization

Window: opening (aperture-sense) – sheet of glass (pane-sense)

Polysemy vs homophony (*bank*)

Polysemous expressions allow for co-predication:

- (2) a. The book is interesting, but very heavy.  
       b. France is hexagonal and a republic.  
       c. John entered through the window after he had smashed it.

Homophonous expressions do not allow for co-predication:

(3) ??? John sat on a bank, at which he has an account.

### Pietroski's theory

Lexicon consists of 'addresses' associated with words: 'conceptual instructions' or 'recipes' for building complex concepts.

In *semantic interpretation* (translation of natural language sentences into conceptual structures), one of the concepts in the address is retrieved, in the formation of largely *conjunctive complex concepts*.

### Polysemy of *book*: arguments in favor

Incompatible predicates:

- (4) a. a small book  
b. a short book

Different readings of predicates:

- (5) a. The book is nice  
b. The book is light.

Different readings of *part of*:

- (6) a. John burned part of the book.  
b. John knows part of the book.

Counting:

- (7) a. There are ten books on the shelf.  
b. John read the books on the shelves – he read two books.

### Issues for the polysemy account of *book*

#### 1. Plausibility of the polysemy

- (8) a. ??? John likes the book that is on his shelf better than the book he just read.  
b. ??? The book on the table is more interesting (as a material object) than the book that got reviewed in the newspaper.  
c. ??? John likes the country he travelled through better than the country he read a history of.

#### 2. Applicability of some predicates

- (9) a. John *wrote* a book.  
b. ??? John wrote the content of a book.

Writing produces something concrete, but the product is also abstract, a content.

2. Inapplicability to certain books

Unique illuminated manuscripts: no reason for content – material object distinction

3. Inapplicable to other artifacts

No separation of material object – content possible for sculptures, paintings etc.

Do windows make a better case for polysemy?

Pietroski: *Window* can pick out the two different concepts in the same sentence:

(10) ? The window they had cut into the wall is nicer than the one they installed.

Pietroski: There are also neutral uses of *window*, *book*, etc

(11) The window that Click preferred is nice than the window that Clack preferred.

Here the NP still represents the ‘instruction’, not a particular concept.

Polysemy of *France* etc

Pietroski: Pronouns are required for co-predication: pronouns permit retrieving different concepts:

(12) France is hexagonal and it is a republic.

Without pronoun anomaly results:

(13) France is a hexagonal republic.

But:

(14) France is hexagonal and democratically governed.

Further observations:

Close appositions for the social organization does not strictly ‘disambiguate’:

(15) a. John visited the Federal Republic of Germany

b. The federal Republic of Germany shares a border with France.

(16) ??? La République Française est hexagonale.

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**2. The ontological alternative: Fine’s variable embodiments**

Books, countries, and windows as variable embodiments

Books as variable embodiments

Associated function from times to manifestations = pluralities of copies

But copies are to be conceived as compositions of material object *and* content.

The counting problem:

Count either the variable objects themselves or their manifestations at a given time.

### Countries as variable embodiments

Associated function mapping a time to a rigid embodiment composed of a region and a political organization

Two part structures?

Two part structures clearly for colleges, ministries, churches, ...

### Windows as variable embodiments?

Function from times to rigid embodiments

Rigid embodiment of a window at a time: composed of opening plus pane

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## **3. Other Chomskyan challenges**

### 1. Functional individuation

Home as opposed to house:

A house reduced to certain functional aspects.

### 2. Polysemy, e. g. *water*

Functional individuation of water: Thirst-drenching tasteless, transparent liquid

Scientific individuation: H<sub>2</sub>O

Natural kind H<sub>2</sub>O

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## **References**

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