

Lecture 1: Introduction to Formal Semantics and Compositionality

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LOOK AT THE WEBSITE FOR THE COURSE: http://people.umass.edu/partee/MGU_2009/
– Become familiar with it. It will be revised and updated during the semester.

- The front page gives the basics – time, place, short description, plus current announcements.
- The “Description” page explains the course requirements and gives a fuller description.
- The “Materials” page, revised weekly, gives a week-by-week schedule of topics, with links to handouts, to the most important readings (downloadable), and to the homework.
- The “Resources” page contains useful downloads and useful links, for this course, and for semantics and pragmatics, and for linguistics in general. One important document available there, which will be updated during the semester, is “**Links to Readings 2009**”, which contains links to all downloadable readings related to this course, and more.

Bring next time or send by e-mail: “Anketa” = Homework No. 0. It’s available separately online: http://people.umass.edu/partee/MGU_2009/materials/Anketa.doc

1. Compositional Semantics and Pragmatics

1.1. The Principle of Compositionality.

A basic starting point of generative grammar: there are infinitely many sentences in any natural language, and the brain is finite, so linguistic competence must involve some finitely describable means for specifying an infinite class of sentences. That is a central task of **syntax**.

Semantics: A speaker of a language knows the meanings of those infinitely many sentences, is able to understand a sentence he/she has never heard before or to express a meaning he/she has never expressed before. So for semantics also there must be a finite way to specify the meanings of the infinite set of sentences of any natural language.

A central principle of formal semantics is that the relation between syntax and semantics is compositional.

The Principle of Compositionality: The meaning of an expression is a function of the meanings of its parts and of the way they are syntactically combined.

Each of the key terms in the principle of compositionality is a “theory-dependent” term, and there are as many different versions of the principle as there are ways of specifying those terms. (*meaning, function, parts (syntax)*)

Some of the different kinds of things meanings could be in a compositional framework:

(a) (early Katz and Fodor) Representations in terms of semantic features. bachelor: [+HUMAN, +MALE, +ADULT, +NEVER-MARRIED (!)]. Semantic composition: adding feature sets together. Problems: insufficient structure for the representations of transitive verbs, quantifiers, and many other expressions; unclear status of uninterpreted features.

(b) Representations in a “language of thought” or “conceptual representation” (Jackendoff, Jerry Fodor); if semantics is treated in terms of representations, then semantic composition means compositional translation from a syntactic representation to a semantic representation.

(c) The logic tradition: Frege, Tarski, Carnap, Montague. The basic meaning of a sentence is its truth-conditions: to know the meaning of a sentence is to know what the world must be like if the sentence is true. Knowing the meaning of a sentence does not require knowing whether the sentence is *in fact* true; it only requires being able to discriminate between situations in which the sentence is true and situations in which the sentence is false.

Starting from the idea that the meaning of a sentence consists of its truth-conditions, meanings of other kinds of expressions are analyzed in terms of their contribution to the truth-conditions of the sentences in which they occur.

1.2. Model-theoretic Semantics.

In formal semantics, truth-conditions are expressed in terms of truth relative to various parameters — a formula may be true at a given time, in a given possible world, relative to a certain context that fixes speaker, addressee, etc., and relative to a certain assignment of meanings to its atomic “lexical” expressions and of particular values to its variables. For simple formal languages, all of the relevant variation except for assignment of values to variables is incorporated in the notion of truth relative to a *model*. Semantics which is based on truth-conditions is called *model-theoretic*.

Compositionality in the Montague Grammar tradition:

The task of a **semantics** for language L is to provide truth conditions for every well-formed sentence of L, and to do so in a compositional way. This task requires providing appropriate model-theoretic interpretations for the *parts* of the sentence, including the lexical items.

The task of a **syntax** for language L is (a) to specify the set of well-formed expressions of L (of every category, not only sentences), and (b) to do so in a way which supports a compositional semantics. The syntactic part-whole structure must provide a basis for semantic rules that specify the meaning of a whole as a function of the meanings of its parts.

Basic structure in classic Montague grammar:

(1) **Syntactic categories and semantic “types”:** For each syntactic category there must be a uniform semantic type. One possible hypothesis: sentences express propositions, nouns and adjectives express properties of entities, verbs express properties of events.

(2) **Basic (lexical) expressions and their interpretation.** Some syntactic categories include basic expressions; for each such expression, the semantics must assign an interpretation of the appropriate type. Within the tradition of formal semantics, most lexical meanings are left unanalyzed and treated as if primitive; Montague regarded most aspects of the analysis of lexical meaning as an empirical rather than formal matter; formal semantics is concerned with the *types* of lexical meanings and with certain aspects of lexical meaning that interact directly with compositional semantics, such as verbal aspect.

(3) **Syntactic and semantic rules.** Syntactic and semantic rules come in pairs: <Syntactic Rule n, Semantic Rule n>; in this sense compositional semantics concerns “the semantics of syntax”. (Example: See syntax and semantics of predicate calculus in Section 3.)

Syntactic Rule n: If α is an expression of category A and β is an expression of category B, then $F_i(\alpha, \beta)$ is an expression of category C. [where F_i is some syntactic operation on expressions]

Semantic Rule n: If α is interpreted as α' and β is interpreted as β' , then $F_i(\alpha, \beta)$ is interpreted as $G_k(\alpha', \beta')$. [where G_k is some semantic operation on semantic interpretations]

1.3. Semantics and pragmatics

The logico-philosophical tradition divides semiotics (the study of signs, applicable to both natural and constructed languages) into **syntax, semantics, and pragmatics** (Morris 1938). On this classic view, **syntax** concerns properties of expressions, such as well-formedness; **semantics** concerns relations between expressions and what they are “about” (typically “the world” or some model), such as reference and truth conditions; and **pragmatics** concerns relations between expressions and their uses in context, such as *conversational implicature* (see Sec. 2.2). Many have challenged the autonomy of semantics from pragmatics implied by the traditional trichotomy, arguing that reference and truth-conditions themselves often depend on context. We will look at these issues in future lectures.

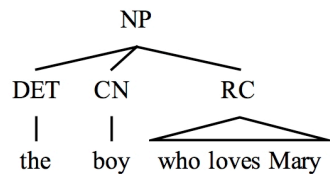
2. Linguistic Examples.

(See also the Larson chapter) These are examples of the kinds of problems that we will be able to solve with the tools of formal semantics and pragmatics. These and other problems will be discussed in future lectures.

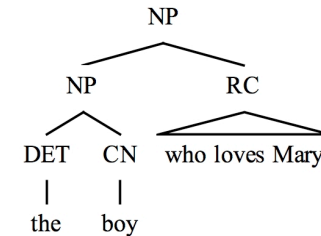
2.1. The structure of NPs with restrictive relative clauses.

Consider NPs such as “the boy who loves Mary”, “every student who dances”, “the doctor who treated Mary”, “no computer which uses Windows”. Each of these NPs has 3 parts: a determiner (DET), a common noun (CN), and a relative clause (RC). The question is: Are there semantic reasons for choosing among three different possible syntactic structures for these NPs?

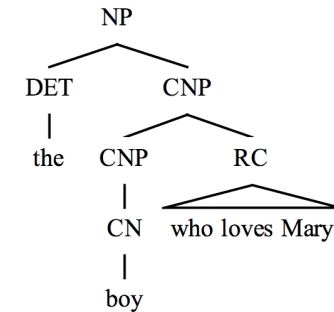
a. Flat structure:



b. “NP - RC” structure: The relative clause combines with a complete NP to form a new NP.



c. “CNP - RC” structure: (CNP: common noun phrase: common noun plus modifiers)



Argument: we can argue that compositionality requires the third structure: that “boy who loves Mary” forms a semantic constituent with which the meaning of the DET combines. We can show that the first structure does not allow for recursivity, and that the second structure cannot be interpreted compositionally. (The second structure is a good structure to provide a basis for a compositional interpretation for *non-restrictive* relative clauses.)

2.2. “Inclusive” vs. “exclusive” disjunction: semantics or pragmatics?

Intuitively, it often seems that natural language *or* is often used in an “exclusive” sense: “p or q but not both”. We can write a truth-table for exclusive *or*, which we will represent with the symbol ‘+’, in contrast with the familiar inclusive *or* symbolized with \vee .

p	q	$p \vee q$	$p + q$
1	1	1	0
1	0	1	1
0	1	1	1
0	0	0	0

The question is, is English *or* (or German *oder*, or Russian *или*, etc.) really semantically ambiguous between two truth-conditional connectives? Or can one defend an analysis on which *or* is semantically always inclusive disjunction, and the apparent exceptions can be explained as a result of pragmatics factors such as Gricean implicatures?

The formula $\forall x(\text{love}(\text{Mary}, x) \rightarrow \text{happy}(x))$ is true in **M** iff:
 for every object d in the domain,
 $d \in \|\text{happy}\|^M$ iff $d \in \|\text{love}\|^M$.

Restating the last statement more carefully and more generally requires talking about semantic values relative to a model and an assignment g of values to variables.

The notation $g[d/x]$ means: The variable assignment which is identical to g except for the (possible) difference that $g[d/x]$ assigns the individual d to the variable x .

The complication of needing to talk about $g[d/x]$ comes from formulas with more than one variable, like:

$\forall x \exists y (\text{love}(y, x) \rightarrow \text{happy}(x))$ and
 $\exists y \forall x (\text{love}(y, x) \rightarrow \text{happy}(x))$. – See the practice exercises at the end.

So let us restate more carefully, according to the semantics given in **Appendix 1**, the truth conditions for the formula: $\forall x(\text{love}(\text{Mary}, x) \rightarrow \text{happy}(x))$:

$\|\forall x(\text{love}(\text{Mary}, x) \rightarrow \text{happy}(x))\|^{M,g} = 1$ iff:
 for each d in D ,
 iff $d \in \|\text{love}\|^{M,g[d/x]}$, then $d \in \|\text{happy}\|^{M,g[d/x]}$.

For each constant α , $\|\alpha\|^{M,g[d/x]} = I(\alpha)$.

And for any variable x , $\|x\|^{M,g[d/x]} = g[d/x](x) = d$. So the condition above is equivalent to:

iff: for each d in D ,
 iff $d \in I(\text{Mary})$, then $d \in I(\text{happy})$.

Example

Let us consider a very simple PC language which has (as in the formulas above) only two constants **John** and **Mary** and two predicate symbols **love** (binary) and **happy** (unary).

Let us consider two models, **M1** and **M2**:

M1 = $\langle D, I_1 \rangle$, $D = \{j, m\}$,
 $I_1(\text{John}) = j$, $I_1(\text{Mary}) = m$,
 $I_1(\text{love}) = \{ \langle j, j \rangle, \langle j, m \rangle, \langle m, m \rangle, \langle m, j \rangle \}$, $I_1(\text{happy}) = \{j, m\}$,

M2 = $\langle D, I_2 \rangle$, $D = \{j, m\}$,
 $I_2(\text{John}) = j$, $I_2(\text{Mary}) = m$,
 $I_2(\text{love}) = \{ \langle j, j \rangle, \langle m, j \rangle \}$, $I_2(\text{happy}) = \{m\}$.

It is easy to see that both formulas **love (John, Mary)** and **love (Mary, John)** are true in **M1** but only the second one is true in **M2**.

The formula $\forall x(\text{love}(\text{Mary}, x) \rightarrow \text{happy}(x))$ is true in **M1**. But it is false in **M2**, since for the evaluation g such that $g(x) = j$ we have $\|\text{love}(\text{Mary}, x)\|^{M_2,g} = 1$ and $\|\text{happy}(x)\|^{M_2,g} = 0$.

The semantics of PC illustrates the Principle of Compositionality.

As we know the infinite set of formulas of PC are built from terms (individual variables and constants) and predicate symbols by recursive syntactic rules (rules R1—R8 in Appendix 1). The semantics of these formulas – their interpretation in every given model – is defined by semantic rules S1 – S8, which correspond in a direct way to the syntactic rules. The semantics of the whole is based on the semantics of parts by means of this pairing of semantic interpretation rules with syntactic formation rules. **See trees 1 and 2 in the**

“practice exercise” in **APPENDIX 2**. This is a very important feature of every formal language -- *The Principle of Compositionality* – and it is natural to think that this principle holds also for natural language.

3.3. “Logical form”, or semantically relevant syntax.

What is the interpretation of “every student”? There is no appropriate syntactic category or semantic type in predicate logic. Predicate logic has many wonderful properties, but we will argue that it is inadequate for representing the semantic structure of natural language.

In the next lectures, we will see how a logic built on a richer type theory including the tools of the lambda-calculus can provide a richer formal semantics that can more adequately represent the structure of natural language semantics in a compositional way.

APPENDIX 1. Syntax and semantics of the predicate calculus (PC).

SYNTAX.

Syntactic Categories: terms (Term), 1-place predicates (Pred-1), 2-place predicates (Pred-2), ..., n-place predicates (Pred-n), formulas (Form).

Basic Expressions:

Basic Term(s): (i) (individual) variables: $x, y, z, x_1, y_1, z_1, x_2, \dots$
 (ii) (individual) constants: **a, b, c, a_1, John, Mary, ...**

Basic Pred-1: **run, walk, happy, calm, ...**

Basic Pred-2: **love, kiss, like, see, ...**

...

Basic Form(ulas): — (none)

Syntactic Rules:

R1: If $P \in \text{Pred-1}$ and $T \in \text{Term}$, then $P(T) \in \text{Form}$.

R2: If $R \in \text{Pred-2}$ and $T_1, T_2 \in \text{Term}$, then $R(T_1, T_2) \in \text{Form}$.

More general rule: If $R \in \text{Pred-n}$ and $T_1, \dots, T_n \in \text{Term}$, then $R(T_1, \dots, T_n) \in \text{Form}$

R3: If $\varphi \in \text{Form}$, then $\neg\varphi \in \text{Form}$.

R4: If $\varphi \in \text{Form}$ and $\psi \in \text{Form}$, then $(\varphi \ \& \ \psi) \in \text{Form}$.

R5: If $\varphi \in \text{Form}$ and $\psi \in \text{Form}$, then $(\varphi \ \vee \ \psi) \in \text{Form}$.

R6: If $\varphi \in \text{Form}$ and $\psi \in \text{Form}$, then $(\varphi \rightarrow \psi) \in \text{Form}$.

R7: If v is a variable and $\varphi \in \text{Form}$, then $\forall v\varphi \in \text{Form}$.

R8: If v is a variable and $\varphi \in \text{Form}$, then $\exists v\varphi \in \text{Form}$.

SEMANTICS.

Model structure:

Domain D of entities (individuals)

Truth values $\{\text{True}, \text{False}\}$ or $\{1, 0\}$

I : Interpretation function which assigns semantic values to all constants (in Term and in Pred-1, Pred-2, ... Pred-n)

$M = \langle D, I \rangle$

Set G of assignment functions g , functions from variables to D .

Semantic Types assigned to Syntactic Categories:

Term: entities, individuals. The semantic values of this type are the members of D .

Pred-1: sets (of entities). Semantic values of this type are members of $\wp(D)$.

($\wp(D)$ is the power set (the set of all subsets) of D).
 Pred-2: relations between entities (sets of pairs). Values: members of $\wp(D \times D)$.
 Pred-n: n-place relations; sets of n-tuples of entities. Values: members of $\wp(D \times \dots \times D)$.
 Form: Truth values. Values: members of $\{0,1\}$.

Semantic interpretation relative to M, g :

We use the notation $\|\varphi\|^{M,g}$ for the semantic value of an expression φ relative to M, g .

Basic Expressions (“lexical semantics”):

- A. If α is a variable, then $\|\alpha\|^{M,g} = g(\alpha)$.
- B. If α is a constant, then $\|\alpha\|^{M,g} = 1(\alpha)$.

Semantic Rules (“semantics of syntax”):

- S1:** If $P \in \text{Pred-1}$ and $T \in \text{Term}$, then $\|P(T)\|^{M,g} = 1$ iff $\|T\|^{M,g} \in \|P\|^{M,g}$.
- S2:** More general rule: If $R \in \text{Pred-n}$ and $T_1, \dots, T_n \in \text{Term}$, then $\|R(T_1, \dots, T_n)\|^{M,g} = 1$ iff $\langle \|\ T_1\|^{M,g}, \dots, \|\ T_n\|^{M,g} \rangle \in \|R\|^{M,g}$.
- S3:** If $\varphi \in \text{Form}$, then $\|\neg\varphi\|^{M,g} = 1$ iff $\|\varphi\|^{M,g} = 0$.
- S4:** If $\varphi, \psi \in \text{Form}$, then $\|(\varphi \ \& \ \psi)\|^{M,g} = 1$ iff $\|\varphi\|^{M,g} = 1$ and $\|\psi\|^{M,g} = 1$.
- S5:** If $\varphi, \psi \in \text{Form}$, then $\|(\varphi \vee \psi)\|^{M,g} = 1$ iff $\|\varphi\|^{M,g} = 1$ or $\|\psi\|^{M,g} = 1$.
- S6:** If $\varphi, \psi \in \text{Form}$, then $\|(\varphi \rightarrow \psi)\|^{M,g} = 1$ iff $\|\varphi\|^{M,g} = 0$ or $\|\psi\|^{M,g} = 1$.
- S7:** If v is a variable and $\varphi \in \text{Form}$, then $\|\forall v\varphi\|^{M,g} = 1$ iff for all $d \in D$, $\|\varphi\|^{M,g[d/v]} = 1$.
- S8:** If v is a variable and $\varphi \in \text{Form}$, then $\|\exists v\varphi\|^{M,g} = 1$ iff there is a $d \in D$ such that $\|\varphi\|^{M,g[d/v]} = 1$.

[The notation $g[d/x]$ means: The variable assignment which is identical to g except for the (possible) difference that $g[d/x]$ assigns the individual d to the variable x .]

Truth: Some formulas are true independent of the choice of assignment; those can be called true relative to just M , i.e. simply true on the given interpretation.

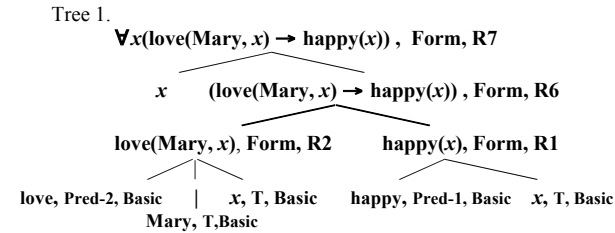
If $\varphi \in \text{Form}$, then: $\|\varphi\|^M = 1$ iff for all assignments g , $\|\varphi\|^{M,g} = 1$.
 $\|\varphi\|^M = 0$ iff for all assignments g , $\|\varphi\|^{M,g} = 0$.
 Otherwise $\|\varphi\|^M$ is undefined.

APPENDIX 2: For Seminar Feb 20: A Practice Homework (to do together in class, not to turn in)

Background:

1. We will first work on the formula $\forall x \text{ happy}(x)$, and work out its interpretation with respect to the model M_2 , working compositionally. We'll do it basically the same way as #2 below, but just on the blackboard.

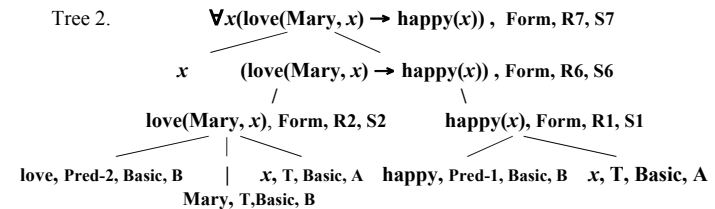
2. Below you will find a syntactic “derivation” tree for the formula $\forall x(\text{love}(\text{Mary}, x) \rightarrow \text{happy}(x))$, which expresses the same proposition as the English sentence *Everyone who Mary loves is happy*. That is followed by a derivation of the truth-conditions of the formula according to the compositional semantic rules of the predicate calculus. Each line is annotated to identify what semantic rule was applied in the derivation of that line, and what node of the syntactic derivation tree it corresponds to. (The problem you are asked to solve is stated after all of that.)



Annotated semantic derivation of truth conditions:

1. $\|\forall x(\text{love}(\text{Mary}, x) \rightarrow \text{happy}(x))\|^{M,g} = 1$ iff for each d in D , $\|\text{love}(\text{Mary}, x) \rightarrow \text{happy}(x)\|^{M,g[d/x]} = 1$. **By rule S7 at the “R7” node.**
2. That will hold iff for each d in D , $\|\text{love}(\text{Mary}, x)\|^{M,g[d/x]} = 0$ or $\|\text{happy}(x)\|^{M,g[d/x]} = 1$. **By rule S6 at the “R6” node.**
3. That will hold iff for each d in D , if $\langle \|\text{Mary}\|^{M,g[d/x]}, \|\ x\|^{M,g[d/x]} \rangle \in \|\text{love}\|^{M,g[d/x]}$, then $\|\ x\|^{M,g[d/x]} \in \|\text{happy}\|^{M,g[d/x]}$. **By rule S2 at the R2 node and by S1 at the R1 node.**
4. And that will hold iff for each d in D , if $\langle \|\text{Mary}\|^{M,g[d/x]}, d \rangle \in \|\text{love}\|^{M,g[d/x]}$, then $d \in \|\text{happy}\|^{M,g[d/x]}$. **By rule A (for variables) at the two x nodes.**
5. I.e., if $\langle I(\text{Mary}), d \rangle \in I(\text{love})$, then $d \in I(\text{happy})$. **By rule B (for constants) at the nodes for Mary, love, happy.**

If we then annotate the syntactic tree above to also show the semantic rule applied at each step, we can see a perfect match between syntactic and semantic rules in the derivation of the form and meaning of the formula.



3. Exercise: (to do in seminar together) This one gives more practice with using g .

The predicate logic formula $\forall x(\exists y \text{ love}(x, y) \rightarrow \text{happy}(x))$ is equivalent to the English sentence *Everyone who loves someone is happy*.

- (b) **Draw a syntactic tree** (analogous to Tree 1 above) which shows how that formula is built up from its parts according to the syntactic rules of the predicate calculus (in the Appendix above).
- (c) **Give each node a label** that identifies both the syntactic category of the expression it dominates and the number of the syntactic rule by which its immediate constituents were combined (or "Basic", if that node dominates a basic expression.)
- (d) **Work out the truth-conditions** of the formula according to the semantic rules of the predicate calculus, analogous to the step-by-step derivation of truth conditions for the example above (see NOTE below). **Annotate each line** by identifying the semantic rule that was applied anywhere within that line (show where), and the node of the tree to which it corresponds. (According to the principle of compositionality, there should be a perfect match between syntactic rule and semantic rule applied at each node.)
- (e) In addition, **further annotate the syntactic tree** by adding to the label of each non-terminal node the number of the *semantic* rule which was used to combine the meanings of the daughter-node expressions to get the meaning of the whole expression dominated by that node. For nodes dominating basic expressions, indicate whether the semantic rule to use is Rule A or Rule B. (If you've done it right, there should be a perfect correspondence between syntactic rules and semantic rules applied at a given node, as in Tree 2 above.)

NOTE: What happens when you are working with $g[d/x]$ and you need to make a further substitution, e.g. for the variable y ? Answer: you need to consider another arbitrary element d' of D , and modify the assignment again, resulting in $g[d/x][d'/y]$: the assignment just like g except it assigns d to x and d' to y .

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