

Servant of two masters? NSM and semantic explanation

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1. Introduction

Uwe Durst opens his helpful précis with the claims that NSM ‘has turned out to be a most useful theoretical and methodological framework for semantic analysis’, and that it ‘is free from various shortcomings of other semantic frameworks.’ Since the insights of NSM scholars into the details of many semantic domains have frequently been acknowledged, the theory’s usefulness for semantic description need scarcely be doubted. I would like to suggest, however, that Durst’s second claim is much more questionable. Not only is NSM subject to shortcomings of its own distinctive stripe, but it inherits others from the approach to semantic analysis characteristic of linguistics generally, of which, in the last analysis, it is only a particularly forthright exemplar. NSM’s most significant problems, then, are just the problems of semantics in general, seen as part of the would-be scientific project of linguistics. These problems are not always obvious from Durst’s survey, and in this commentary I will indicate some of the most interesting. Given the space available, I will not discuss the universality of NSM’s proposed primitives, perhaps the issue which has most often stimulated discussion. I will also only

address the lexical semantics aspects of NSM. These are, in any case, at the theory's core, and since analogous issues arise in its treatment of other topics, the omission from this commentary of any discussion of the NSM approach to morphology, cultural scripts, pragmatics, and the like is, I trust, appropriate.

Supporters have grounded claims of NSM's superiority in its adherence to the empirical goals of linguistics, specifically universal testability and susceptibility of direct verification or disconfirmation (cf. Durst p.[5]). In emphasizing these features, NSM is only acceding to the ground rules of 'scientific' investigation as they are commonly understood in linguistics — perceived violations of which NSM scholars have often criticized in others. At the same time, though, NSM's proponents have stressed a principle which apparently runs in the opposite direction: the requirement that any semantic metalanguage be free from technical and other supposedly arbitrary, artificial elements. This commitment to naturalness seems contradictory because in other areas of investigation, the development of a 'scientific' (i.e. empirical and testable) theory necessitates the very type of technical, artificial vocabulary which NSM explicitly repudiates: evolutionary theory, for instance, would be impossible without an extensive array of theoretical terms which outstrip quotidian, 'natural' descriptions of the living world. Consideration of generative phonological theory, for one, suggests that linguistics is no different.

NSM's desire to fashion natural semantic descriptions which can be genuinely explanatory to language learners and cultural outsiders is a laudable goal. But it would

seem to be more appropriate to a paedagogic method than to a semantic theory. If the point of linguistics is to provide an account of language structure which can ultimately articulate with a causal, scientific explanation of language behaviour, then NSM, with its apparent focus on the question ‘how can I explain the meanings of words (to others)?’, may be in the wrong business. To fully serve the goals of linguistic science, the question ‘what is happening when I understand the meaning of a word?’ might seem more appropriate. Some might wonder, of course, whether science is even credible, let alone desirable, as the main methodological paradigm for linguistics. Implicit in the NSM project, indeed, is an assertion of a humanistic, rather than a technical, vision of semantics. Yet the statements of NSM’s proponents and the debates in which they choose to intervene suggest that for all its alternative vision of meaning, the theory is to meant to be judged on the very criteria of rigour, empiricism and objectivity which its scientific rivals also endorse.

The issues which will be highlighted here fall into two groups: problems specific to NSM’s particular methodology (section two), and problems which are not limited to NSM semantics, but which are especially obvious in the context of its claims of methodological superiority (section three). The reader will find a more detailed discussion of these points in Riemer (forthcoming).

2. NSM-specific issues

2.1 Scope

An initial question concerns what may be described as the inherent incompleteness of NSM's account of meaning. NSM is only possible if around sixty very common words are placed, as primitive, beyond theoretical analysis. As a result, NSM can say no more about such important concepts as 'good', 'think', 'body' and 'above' than that they are indefinable. Whether or not this is a satisfactory situation is a complicated question. One might think that semantics owes an account of what it is that makes such concepts so central. While it may be true that, as NSM scholars frequently emphasize (cf. Durst p.[9]), you cannot define everything, this could be taken as a reason to doubt the centrality of definition to a theory of meaning, rather than as an invitation to embark on a quest for indefinable semantic atoms (cf. Fodor 1998). In contrast to NSM, a semantic theory that is not carved out of natural language has no such inherent incompleteness.

2.2 Simplicity, intelligibility and explanation

At the heart of NSM's conception of meaning is the idea that the comprehensibility of language is explained by the fact that meaning ultimately bottoms out in a level of maximally simple, primitive elements (Durst p.[3]; cf. Wierzbicka 1996: 11-12). Yet 'simple' has two senses, each naming quite different properties, one glossable as 'primitive, non-compound', the other as 'maximally easy to understand'. It is the

identification of these two properties that allows NSM to select its primitives from natural language, bringing into play assumptions about the nature of understanding which deserve scrutiny. It is true that a successful definition must use definienda which are simpler than the definienda they analyze. This does not entail, however, that there is an unchanging canon of terms in any one language — let alone universally — which represent the absolutely simplest possible elements of semantic explanation. Simplicity, in other words, need not be assumed to be an invariant property of an expression that can be displayed on an absolute scale. Goddard's (2002: 5) identification of 'simpler' with 'more intelligible' is therefore welcome, since it implies that intelligibility is something manifested in *events of understanding*, and that something's intelligibility may vary from person to person. 'Intelligibility', that is, is a relational, pragmatic property: it can only be measured by how successfully something *is actually understood* by someone on some occasion.

What determines an expression's intelligibility? One plausible answer is that an expression is made intelligible not by being related to what is inherently simpler, but by being related to what is *already known*, wherever this may stand on a putative scale of absolute simplicity: to explain a meaning correctly we do not have to build it up out of a would-be level of elementary particles, but only relate it to things which are already familiar to the audience for whom the explanation is intended. Since what is already known varies between audiences, the acceptance of prior knowledge as the criterion of semantic explanation has quite far-reaching consequences. For second language learners and other cultural outsiders (the audience NSM seems most often to have in mind; cf.

Durst p.[18]) what is already known is the first language: explanations of L2 meanings are thus best achieved in terms of the L1. Theoreticians of language, contrastingly, not only have different questions, but also different prior knowledge, including the entire (though still inchoate) set of technical notions evolved in linguistics. Whatever the adequacy of these terms in their current state, it is a defensible expectation that linguistic explanations of meaning will ultimately be able to be brought into relation with the elements of some other science (whether neurological, psychological, or whatever) which will ground linguistic terms in a non-arbitrary way, thus providing an exit from the much-feared definitional circle. NSM scholars have specifically rejected this expectation (Wierzbicka and Goddard 1994: 7), but this has the price of containing semantics on a semiotic island which necessitates the designation of some meanings as primitive and removes the possibility of any connection between semantics and broader science.

2.3 Polysemy I: canonical contexts

As recognized by Ricoeur (1975: 148), polysemy can be considered the central phenomenon of semantics. For NSM, it surfaces in two distinct forms, discussed in this and the next section. Durst comments that ‘it is not surprising that some of the exponents of the hypothetical primes are polysemous’ (p. [13]). This understates the case considerably: many — perhaps all — of the English exponents of the NSM primes are polysemous, with only one of these polysemous senses being identified as universal. For example, in testing for the presence of an exponent of a primitive meaning in some language, it is not enough simply to ask whether the language in question has words for

‘I, you, someone, etc.’; instead, it is necessary to distinguish the sense claimed as universal from the others: is the primitive TRUE, for instance, better represented by the meaning present in (1) or (2)?

(1) If you read it in a book it must be true.

(2) You must be true to yourself.

The most obvious way to distinguish the intended sense would be simply to *define* it verbally. But since, *ex hypothesi*, the semantic primitives are indefinable, this option is unavailable. Instead, theorists stipulate ‘a set of “canonical contexts” in which each prime can occur; that is, a set of sentences or sentence fragments exemplifying grammatical (combinatorial) contexts for each prime’ (Goddard 2002: 14). For example, only (3a) is considered to involve the primitive sense of *move*:

(3) a. This person can’t move. (Wierzbicka 1996: 30)

b. Her words moved me.

Sentences like (3a) define the canonical contexts which can be used to test for the presence of NSM primes, supposedly fixing which polysemous sense is intended as primitive.

The problem here is that like all such sentences, (3a) is, itself, multiply ambiguous (polysemous), having at least the following three interpretations, of which presumably the first is the one intended:

(4) This person can't move (part of) their body.

This person can't change dwelling.

This person can't change their ideas [about a particular issue].

Such ambiguity is inescapable. Specification of a canonical context will never succeed in excluding unwanted senses, since no sentence can uniquely determine a single meaning: the possibility of multiple interpretations can never be excluded, even in a rigorously formalized metalanguage. The canonical contexts thus do not provide the required unambiguous delineation of a single meaning, but require disambiguation through definition in language. Adequate disambiguation cannot be provided, however, without violating the main principle of the analysis, namely that the primes are indefinable.

3. NSM and linguistic semantics

We will now discuss problems not confined to NSM, but which are highlighted by its claims of methodological superiority.

3.1 Polysemy II: diagnosing polysemy

Any attempt to describe meaning must recognize the existence of different senses within a single word. Without such recognition, description through ordinary language paraphrase becomes impossible. The need to recognize polysemy is even greater for NSM than for other semantic theories, since languages often seem to violate one of its central postulates, the *Strong Lexicalisation Hypothesis*, according to which '[e]very semantically primitive meaning can be expressed through a distinct word, morpheme or fixed phrase in every language' (Goddard 1994: 13; cf. Durst p.[12]). Apparent disconfirmations of this principle are typically solved in NSM by the supposition of polysemy in the expression in question (e.g. Goddard 1998: 138).

The postulation of polysemy must not be unconstrained. It would clearly be unsatisfactory if any word which appeared to merge putative primitives could be dismissed as polysemous. NSM research must therefore have criteria for the recognition of polysemy in order to prevent it simply being invoked as an ad hoc fix. As in many other approaches to semantics, this is achieved through an appeal to syntax. In other words, an expression is taken to be polysemous between two senses if each is associated with differing syntactic possibilities: a different syntactic frame/combinatorial possibility shows a different (polysemous) meaning. I have elsewhere referred to this principle as SEP, the 'syntactic evidence for polysemy' principle (Riemer 2003). Appeal to SEP is made in order to differentiate polysemous senses both of exponents of the primes (see

Goddard 2002: 24-26), and of semantically complex words whose senses must be teased out before an NSM paraphrase can be given (see Wierzbicka 1996: 272-4).

There is not time here to rehearse the abundant evidence against SEP (see Riemer 2003 and forthcoming). Suffice it to make the following point: if the appeal to syntax is to be a viable polysemy diagnostic, the claim has to be that *whenever* a lexeme is associated with more than one syntactic frame or combinatorial possibility, then it has different (polysemous) meanings. Otherwise, some other criterion — most obviously a semantic one — will have to be invoked in order to adjudicate between unclear cases. Since SEP is being proposed as a way of regulating possible semantic paraphrases, such an appeal to a semantic criterion would be circular. It is clear, however, that SEP is not advanced as an absolute indicator of polysemy in NSM theory. In a discussion of *advise*, for example, Wierzbicka (1996: 243) notes the existence of two different syntactic frames in which the verb can appear:

- (5) The doctor advised Bill to have complete rest.
- (6) The doctor advised complete rest.

If syntax were consistently appealed to as a test of polysemy, it would be necessary either to claim that *advise* was polysemous, with (5) and (6) instantiating different senses, or to define ‘syntax’ in such a way as to exclude the difference between them. NSM theory has not, however, done either. No definition of syntax has ever, to my knowledge, been provided, and Wierzbicka explicitly denies that (5) and (6) exemplify different senses

(1996: 243). Given that differing syntactic options exist for many words which are not recognized as polysemous by NSM, this question counts, in my opinion, as one of the most pressing for the coherence of the theory.

3.2 Identity and substitutability

Like virtually all linguistic semantic theories, NSM takes as a basic condition on its semantic definienda that they be substitutable for their definienda. This condition is regularly invoked in order to test proposed NSM analyses: if the semantic paraphrase can be substituted for the definiendum in the original context without loss or addition of meaning, it is accepted as accurate. (I will ignore the fact that since NSM paraphrases target only the invariant part of an expression's meaning, *all* semantic explications involve meaning loss.) Substitutability and identity are, however, quite different relations, and we should not assume that one unambiguously reveals the other. Identity is about the inner essence of something, whereas substitutability is about equivalence *with respect to a given function*. Whereas the semantic identity of a linguistic unit is assumed to be fixed, substitutability varies from one situation to another. As regards NSM paraphrases and other theoretical definitions, it is only in the abstract, theoretical context of definition-checking that substitutability is meant to hold, definienda clearly not being substitutable for their definienda in the context of ordinary language use. The fact that definienda can only be substituted for definienda within a definitional practice therefore tells us nothing more than that definiens and definiendum are functionally equivalent *for this purpose*. The argument from functional equivalence to actual identity is a separate

one, and it needs to be made separately. The fact that this necessity is rarely acknowledged in linguistic semantics does not, in my view, make it any less acute.

The preceding discussion has assumed that it is possible for the investigator to know whether definiendum and substitutable paraphrase are identical in meaning. But where does this knowledge come from, and what is the metalanguage in which the meanings of each can be represented in order to justify this judgement of identity? This question goes to the heart of any semantic theory's claim to be a rigorously scientific, empirical endeavour. Without such an independent justification the argument for the correctness of an NSM paraphrase is apparently circular: a particular NSM definition is a true representation of the meaning of a definiendum because it does not involve any addition to or loss from this meaning — because, in other words, it is a true representation of its meaning. This is, clearly, not just a question affecting NSM, but an unavoidable condition of semantic analysis in general. Because of it, any semanticist, whatever their theory, should exercise caution in the claims they make for the objectivity or scientificity of their practice. Without any independent justification or elaboration of the decision procedures justifying a judgement of semantic identity between definiens and definiendum, a semantic theory is very far from providing a non-arbitrary method of semantic description arising from 'a coherent semantic theory and well-developed semantic methodology' (Wierzbicka 1999: 23-4). Genuinely scientific hypotheses do not require subjective, introspective assessment on the part of the scientist as a central component of their testing. By contrast, the judgements of semantic identity and difference through which a method of semantic description is tested depend crucially on

introspective subjective assessments. As a result, not only are these judgements subject to culturally conditioned variability: even worse, they are subject to *individual* variability between different scholars from the same culture — as evidenced by the existence of disagreements about whether a particular paraphrase is or is not semantically equivalent to the definiendum in question. The all-pervasive subjectivity of the enterprise of meaning description is thus by far a more serious obstacle to a scientific semantics than any interference from cultural factors.

3.3 Disconfirmation

This raises a related question. Since Popper (1959), susceptibility to falsification has often been taken as a defining characteristic of science. Contrary to many linguists' belief, this is not a universally accepted criterion: on the arguments of Feyerabend (1993), indeed, *no* such defining characteristics exist. Nevertheless, the extent to which a theory needs modification in the light of apparent disconfirmation is one indication of its empirical content. What happens, then, when an NSM paraphrase is disconfirmed? For NSM as for any other theory, two avenues of response are typically available. The first avenue, which is of the very essence of empirical science, is to modify the paraphrase to remove the problem; the second is to claim that the counterexample pertains to a different (polysemous) sense of the definiendum. The latter response is highly problematic, since, as already noted, there seem to be no rigorous external controls on the postulation of polysemy. Without such controls, the NSM program can never be conclusively falsified, since the researcher can claim that an apparent counter-example to their paraphrase just

shows that the paraphrase needs more work, or that the meaning in question is different from the one being described — both of these points sufficiently ambiguous and lacking in clear decision procedures as to remove the possibility of clear adjudication.

It will be obvious that, once again, this situation is in no way particular to NSM.

Goddard (2002: 6), however, mentions a third possible response to empirical failure which is often an implicit part of the methodology of other theories, but rarely articulated so explicitly:

Perhaps the venture will work out well in some respects and not so well in others; there is no reason to assume *a priori* that it is an all or nothing affair.

On Goddard's suggestion, then, NSM may provide the key to some, but not all, meaning in natural language. Since exhaustivity is integral to the notion of a set of semantic primitives, however, this is surely not a possibility the theory can afford to entertain: the semantic primitives of a language are, precisely, those words which are required for the definition of the language's *entire* vocabulary. As a result, there is something paradoxical in the idea that a set of semantic primitives might apply to some but not all words. NSM is indisputably entitled to pursue its research in the face of disconfirming evidence, on the supposition that further facts will be uncovered which will bring failures of existing analyses under the explanatory control of the theory. We should not, however, accept the possibility of a restricted NSM that is used simply wherever it can be made to work, in the face of acknowledged failures elsewhere. Accepting this would be

an annulment of the theory's claim of methodological rigour, and a dissolution of its broader metaphysical postulates about the nature of meaning.

4. Conclusion

As Durst emphasises, NSM's aversion to technical vocabulary derives from its origins as a broader 'anti-formalist enterprise' (p. [36]). One might well ask, however, whether NSM really honours its claim to provide natural, and therefore accessible and 'non-elitist' semantic paraphrases. The names of the NSM primitives are, it is true, ordinary words. Yet their meanings cannot be identified with the polysemous, connotation-laden and contextually enriched meanings of their exponents in any given language. Yet it is precisely in its pervasive polysemy and implication in rich connotational and contextual networks that the naturalness of linguistic meaning arguably resides. And since, as we have seen, the indefinability of the primitives means that it is impossible to specify exactly the way in which their meanings differ from that of their natural language exponents, the claim of naturalness rings rather hollow. On the theory's own admission, the primitives aren't identical to their natural language exponents, but just *how* they differ remains mysteriously unspecifiable, even if, the present arguments to the contrary notwithstanding, the validity of canonical sentences as a means of such specification is granted.

Biting the bullet and acknowledging that the primes aren't really natural would solve a number of the problems identified in this commentary. To drop the 'N' from NSM in

this way would, however, strip the theory of its main distinguishing feature. The criticisms leveled in this article should not obscure the ingenuity, dedication and resourcefulness of NSM's proponents. Nor should the indisputable stimulus the theory provides on the disciplinary level be discounted. In its commitment to detailed description, its insights into the meanings of many words, its preparedness to engage the sacred cows of linguistics and its tenacity in pursuing a heterodox research agenda, NSM shows an intellectual independence that is valuable in the landscape of contemporary linguistics. The price of this independence, however, is a certain dislocation from what presumably is for many the main game in language study. The relationship between NSM and the central questions of contemporary linguistics has, it would seem, more often than not been one of antagonism. Readers of the NSM literature will find many reasons to be suspicious of developments in such areas of research as pragmatics, prototype semantics, linguistic anthropology, and cognitive grammar. But, apart from the occasional statement of the primitives' innateness (Wierzbicka 1996: 13; 1999: 10), they will be left without any clear idea, even in general terms, of how the existence of the primitives is to be reconciled with an empirical and 'naturalistic' vision of the place of meaning in broader psychological, developmental and, ultimately, biological contexts. It would only be fair to ask whether NSM's treatment of these questions is any sketchier than that of its competitors. But, as pointed out at the start of this commentary, NSM's attempt to simultaneously serve the masters of language pedagogy and linguistic science would seem to put it at a particular disadvantage compared with semantic theories which are not committed a priori to the avoidance of the usual, technical means of explanatory progress.

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