DISCUSSION ABSTRACT

I articulate and defend act-theoretic semantics, a novel account of the foundations and methodology of the study of linguistic meaning. For an expression to have meaning, I contend, is for speakers to be disposed to perform a certain type of speech act with it and to interpret others’ utterances of the expression as speech acts of the same type. I argue that this theory combines the best qualities of formal semantics, which takes expressions’ meanings to be their representational contents, and use theories of meaning, which takes meanings to be patterns of or rules for use. I reject formal semantics on the grounds that it fails to account for linguistic context-sensitivity, non-representational dimensions of meaning, and the role played by meaning in communication. I follow other philosophers in rejecting use theories on the grounds that they fail to explain how sentences’ meanings systematically depend on their structures and the meanings of their simpler parts.

BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

The dominant theoretical paradigm in the study of linguistic meaning is formal semantics (a.k.a. Montague grammar or model-theoretic semantics). The approach originates in the work of Richard Montague and other philosophers and linguists centered around UCLA in the late 1960’s.\(^1\) The methodology of formal semantics is based on the application to natural languages of model-theoretic techniques that were originally devised to study formal and mathematical languages. The meaning of an expression, according to formal semantics, can be thought of as the expression’s representational or truth-conditional content. The meanings of words are the objects, prop-

\(^1\) Some of the most important early works in formal semantics are Lewis (1970) and the articles collected in Montague (1974), Partee (2004), and Portner and Partee (2002). The most influential recent codification of formal semantics is Heim and Kratzer (1998).
erties, or concepts they stand for, and the meaning of a sentence is the proposition it expresses or the condition under which it would be true.²

The great strength of formal semantics has been that it has excelled at working out the details of *compositionality*—the fact that sentences’ meanings wholly and systematically depend on their structures and the meanings of their parts. Drawing on its mathematical roots, formal semantics has contributed precise and insightful accounts of how the meanings of many complex expressions are built up from the meanings of their parts.

Nonetheless, a variety of linguistic phenomena pose serious problems for formal semantics. Context-sensitive expressions, such as ‘I’, ‘here’, tensed sentences, and many less obvious examples, can be used to represent different things on different occasions. Since these expressions’ meanings therefore can’t be identified with their representational contents, they demand a significant revision to the formal semantic paradigm. Although influential attempts have been made to accommodate context-sensitivity within a formal semantic framework,³ several philosophers have recently argued that these solutions can’t help us to understand the meanings of context-sensitive expressions.⁴ Another problem case for formal semantics is that of non-declarative sentences, such as the interrogative and imperative sentences used to ask questions and issue commands. The meanings of these sentences don’t seem to be merely a matter of what they represent or the conditions under which they are true. Rather, the meaning of an interrogative sentence like ‘would you like some pie’ seems to boil down, at least in part, to what we do with it—namely, the fact that we use it to ask questions.

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² Cf. Lewis: "A meaning for a sentence is something that determines the conditions under which a sentence is true or false. It determines the truth-value of the sentence in possible states of affairs, at various times, at various places, for various speakers, and so on" (1970: 195).


What unites context sensitive expressions with non-declarative sentences is that understanding what they mean seems to require understanding how speakers use them to communicate, not merely what they represent. This simple but powerful insight has been around since the middle of the 20th century, when J. L. Austin, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and others began to champion the idea that an expression's meaning should be understood as a pattern of, or rule for, the expression's use.5 Austin's and Wittgenstein's ideas about the performativity, multidimensionality, and social embeddedness of language and linguistic meaning have been massively influential throughout the humanities, making Austin and Wittgenstein two of the most influential philosophers of the Twentieth Century.6 Somewhat ironically, however, their groundbreaking and widely influential ideas about meaning have had little influence within the field of semantics itself. The reason is that use theories of meaning have consistently failed to explain how the meanings of sentences and other complex expressions depend systematically on the meanings of their simpler parts, and this is seen by semanticists as the crucial explanatory goal of their discipline.7 In other words: use theories of meaning fall down when it comes to compositionality, which is precisely where formal semantic theories excel. No theory of meaning has succeeded in combining the strengths of both schools of thought.

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6 According to Google Scholar, Austin (1962) has been cited over 22,000 times and Wittgenstein (1953) has been cited over 30,000 times, which places them among the ten most cited philosophers of the last century, along with the likes of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Thomas Kuhn, and John Rawls.

7 For powerful recent critiques of Horwich's use theory on the grounds that it fails to explain compositionality, see Fodor and Lepore (2002), Heck (forthcoming).
THE PROJECT AND ITS METHODOLOGY

The aim of my dissertation is to articulate and defend an approach to linguistic meaning that can combine the best qualities of formal semantics with the best quality of use theories of meaning. I call the approach *act-theoretic semantics*, because it identifies the meaning of an expression with the type of speech act we are disposed to perform with the expression. (Speech acts, which were first studied by Austin, are the actions that speakers perform in order to communicate, and that addressees must correctly interpret in order for communication to succeed.)

Act-theoretic semantics incorporates the advantages of use theories of meaning by allowing the meaning of an expression to be a matter of what people do with it. In performing speech acts, we don't merely represent aspects of the world, we also ask questions, issue commands, imply things beyond what we literally say, signal socially significant facts about ourselves through our choice of words, do things that are rude or polite, and express emotional states. Since these are all aspects of the speech acts we are disposed to perform with particular expressions, act-theoretic semantics has a place for them in its account of those expressions' linguistic meanings. This gives act-theoretic semantics significantly more explanatory power than formal semantics when it comes to dealing with the aspects of natural languages, such as those just listed, that distinguish them from the artificial languages of logic and mathematics.

Nevertheless, act-theoretic semantics retains the chief explanatory advantage of formal semantics by accounting for the compositionality of sentence meaning in terms of the compositionality of speech acts. Just as the meaning of a sentence depends systematically on the meanings of its parts, the properties of complex speech acts (like asserting that Ludwig is a philosopher) depend systematically on the simpler speech acts which are their parts (like the act of referring to Ludwig and the act of predicating the property of being a philosopher of him). According act-theoretic semantics, the compositionality of sentence meaning can be understood in terms of the structures of complex speech acts and the properties of their simpler parts.
Act-theoretic semantics has important precursors, and I argue in my dissertation that nascent versions of the theory can be found in the work of both Paul Grice and my advisor, Stephen Neale.\(^8\) Until now, however, nobody has attempted to fully articulate act-theoretic semantics, systematically show why it is better than the alternatives (including formal semantics), defend it against objections, or work out the details of how it can help us to understand the meanings of a wide variety of particular linguistic phenomena. These are the goals of my dissertation.

My dissertation is broken into the following five chapters.

**Chapter 1: Semantics without Semantic Content**

Here I argue that semantic theories that think of expressions’ linguistic meanings as their representational contents are fatally flawed. My two key case studies are pure demonstrative pronouns (‘this’, ‘that’, ‘he’) and non-declarative sentences (‘Go to your room!’, ‘Is that pie for sale?’). I argue that all contemporary attempts to explain the meanings of these expressions within the framework formal semantics and other representationalist account of meaning fail to account for the role played by linguistic meaning in communication. Some of these arguments are drawn from the existing literature, but several are of my own devising. Put another way: I argue that no bell or whistle can be added to formal semantics that will allow it to do justice to the context-sensitivity and performativity of linguistic meaning first pointed out by Austin and Wittgenstein.

I close this chapter with an introduction to act-theoretic semantics and an explanation of how it allows us to understand the meanings of context sensitive expressions and non-declarative sentences.

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Chapter 2: Meaning without Convention

My second and third chapters are about metasemantics, which aims to answer the foundational question: 'In virtue of what do expressions have meaning?' In other words, a metasemantic theory aims to give an account of the facts about speakers, their minds, and their practices that establish the connection between expressions and their meanings. The dominant answer to this question, which is favored by most formal semanticists, is that expressions have meaning in virtue of the linguistic conventions in which speakers participate. In Chapter 2, I argue that this answer is incorrect. I begin with the premise that an important task for which we need a theory of meaning in the first place is to explain the special efficiency of linguistic communication. I then give examples of real and hypothetical situations in which highly efficient linguistic communication can occur in the absence of linguistic conventions. I conclude that meaning is not constitutively conventional, and that an adequate metasemantic theory therefore should not appeal to conventions.

Chapter 3: Meaning and Communicative Dispositions

In this chapter I articulate my own metasemantic theory, whose main influence is Grice (1968), and show how it avoids the problems faced by convention-based theories. I argue that expressions have meaning for groups of speakers in virtue of the speakers’ overlapping communicative dispositions. Specifically: an expression is meaningful for a pair of speakers if and only if at least one of the speakers has a disposition to utter the expression in order to perform a certain type of speech act and the other speaker is disposed to interpret utterances of the expression as performances as the same type of speech act. This theory is designed to explain the communicative efficiency made possible by the meaningfulness of linguistic expressions without relying on linguistic conventions. After articulating the theory and spending much of the chapter explaining the nature of communicative dispositions and their relationship to the psychology and practices underlying language use, I apply the theory to solve several philosophical problems about the foundations of linguistics. For example: whereas it has been a popular view since Chomsky (1986) to deny that
any principled boundaries can be drawn to distinguish one group of language users (say, German speakers) from another (say, Dutch speakers), I argue that speech communities can be individualized in terms of the same patterns of overlapping communicative dispositions that give rise to the meanings of their words.

I close the chapter by showing how my metasemantic theory supports act-theoretic semantics, since it conceives of meaning as a relation between expressions and the types of speech acts that speakers are disposed to perform with them.

**Chapter 4: Act-Theoretic Compositionality**

In this chapter I elaborate the act-theoretic semantic theory outlined in Chapter 1, and demonstrate how it can account for the way in which complex expressions’ meanings depend systematically on the meanings of their parts. Since the theory holds that an expression's meaning is the type of speech act we perform with it, this amounts to showing how complex types of speech acts are build from simpler types of speech acts in a way that depends on their structure. The key notion in this account is the act of predication, which plays the role of “combinatory glue” that unites acts of referring to objects and properties into acts of saying things, asking questions, and so on.

In addition to giving a general outline of how act-theoretic semantics can handle a rich variety of complex expressions, I also show that adopting an act-theoretic conception of semantics places substantive constraints on how a compositional semantic theory must be formulated. The current orthodoxy in formal semantics holds that the interface between syntax and semantics is minimal, in the sense that a semantic theory needs very little information about a sentence’s structure in order to predict its meaning. I demonstrate that the nature of the act of predication is

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9 This idea goes back to Klein and Sag (1985), but is also incorporated into Heim and Kratzer’s (1998) codification of formal semantics.
such that act-theoretic semantics need more structural information to do the job. I go on to show how act-theoretic semantics can meet this constraint.

**Chapter 5: Dimensions of Meaning**

In my final chapter I argue that act-theoretic semantics gives us the resources to understand a variety of linguistic phenomena with which formal semantics has floundered. The following series of sentences illustrates what I mean:

(1) Oliver buys me a drink.
(2) Buy me a drink! [addressed to Oliver]
(3) Please buy me a drink! [addressed to Oliver]
(4) Buy me a drink already! [addressed to Oliver]
(5) Purchase me a potation. [addressed to Oliver]

The meaning of (1) differs from the meanings of each of the other sentence, but intuitively this is not because they represent different facts. We have good reasons to say that each sentence has the same representational content: that Oliver buys Dan a drink. The sentences differ in meaning along other dimensions, having to do with what speakers do with them. I can order Oliver buy me a drink with (2), I can do so politely with (3), I can imply that he is behind schedule with (4), and I can poetically (or more likely pretentiously) demand a drink with (5). Since these differences aren’t differences in what the sentences represent, formal semantics has struggled to come to terms with them. I show how act-theoretic semantics can handle these different dimensions of meaning in a way that fits in with the account of compositionality given in the Chapter 4.

**TIMELINE**

As I write this proposal, I have already completed polished drafts of Chapters 2 and 4. In September, I submitted an essay based on Chapter 4, entitled ‘Act-Theoretic Semantics and the Syntax-
Semantics Interface’, to the philosophy journal *Mind*. I expect to hear the results within the next month or two. Just this week, I have submitted an essay based on Chapters 2 and 3, entitled ‘Metasemantics without Linguistic Convention’, to the journal *Philosophers’ Imprint*. I expect to spend the spring of 2013 finishing drafts of Chapter 1 and 2 and readying an essay based on Chapter 1 for submission to another philosophy journal.

In the summer and fall I will have to split my time between dissertation work and preparation for the job market. I aim to have a draft of my fifth chapter ready early in the fall semester, which will allow me to spend the most of the fall and winter revising my chapters in response to comments from my committee. This will put me in a position to devote a good deal of time to the job market between October and January of 2014, and will allow me to defend my dissertation early in the spring of 2014.

This timeline represents the final stages in a plan that has been in motion for several years, and that is right on track. Based on all of the advice I have received from my mentors, together with my research into the recent state of the philosophy job market, I believe that sticking to this schedule will put me in an excellent position during job market season. Financial support in the form of a dissertation fellowship would prevent a possible last minute derailment of my timeline due to an extremely heavy teaching load beginning in the summer, and so would be enormously helpful in allowing me to carry the plan through to a happy conclusion.
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