

Making sense of sense

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Abstract

What I think about mainstream formal semantics will not come as a surprise to those who know me: I think absolutely nothing is correct in it. It is based upon dubious concepts like “individuals”, it posits sharp boundaries where there isn’t one in terms of our observations (e.g., the arity of predicates), while it ignores important differences (e.g., between the semantic types of common nouns, adjectives and intransitive verbs).

On this occasion, I will talk about the concept of *sense*, and why neither the Frege/Carnap (i.e., intensional) nor the hyperintensional types of approach, offered by philosophers and logicians as models of sense, seem very appealing to linguists. They usually assume the former (that is what we teach at universities). They ignore the criticism by the supporters of the latter view, and can safely do so because the whole issue is not their everyday concern.

I will outline, in a very sketchy and preliminary manner, an unorthodox view of sense and an unorthodox semantic machinery that should underlie it. The basic idea is that sense is of an essentially meta-linguistic character, i.e., it is about language use rather than models. This has the sad consequence that the underlying model theory, too, must be meta-linguistic (models must cover the use of language), and interpretation is not to be viewed as a direct translation from a natural language to a logical language. On the other hand, it has the happy consequence that it is more appealing from the point of view of explaining linguistic observations.