REPLY TO "DO LINGUISTIC MEANINGS MEET LINGUISTIC FORM?"

―――――――

PATRICK DUFFLEY
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5566-9076
Laval University
Department Languages, Linguistics and Translation
Quebec
Canada
Patrick.Duffley@lli.ulaval.ca

Abstract: In reply to the claim that syntax is not taken into account in *Linguistic Meaning Meets Linguistic Form*, I show that local syntactic analysis has been implemented in the treatment of aspectual verbs and verbs of positive and negative recall, where the syntactic function of the *-ing* form as direct object of the main verb is put into relation with the main verb's meaning as the basis for the inferences drawn concerning the temporal relation between the main verb's event and that expressed by the complement. I argue that I have also developed new tools of syntactic analysis for the *to*-infinitive, demonstrating that it is not the direct object of the main verb, but rather a goal- or result-specifier, and showing how this accounts for the fact that its event is always understood to be somehow subsequent to that of the main verb. Regarding the applicability of formal semantics to natural language, I argue that the absolute priority accorded to the truth-functional dimension of language by this type of semantics leads to the artificial separation of use-conditions from truth-conditions, with the former being

treated as an additional interpretational function added on to the truth-functional one. *Contra* the autonomous syntax claim that our desire to express meaning is to a great extent independent of the means we use to express those meanings, it is argued that how we perceive the world in our experience is influenced by our system of linguistic representation.

At the outset, I would like to thank the author of this contribution for pointing to the need to investigate in greater depth the role of syntax in the complex process leading to the conveying of the final take-home message expressed by a linguistic utterance, and for pointing out that this dimension is barely addressed in my monograph. In my defense, I would plead first of all that contrary to the contributor's allegation on page 156 of his text (Saab, 2022), I never reduced the factors on which the interpretation of primitive lexical meanings is based solely to "intentions", nor did I exclude any input of syntax in the interpretation process; all I claimed was that formal syntax sheds no light upon what is really going on. I would also plead that a non-autonomous syntax such as the one implied by my work needs to be built from the ground up, based on a careful reconstitution of the semantic content of the words that are assembled to form an utterance and the constraints that the latter place upon their assemblage, and on an even more careful separating out of this semantic content from pragmatic factors, which entails an analysis of what they contribute to the message as well. This is a gargantuan task that I hope to make a contribution to in a subsequent monograph. I would claim that I have nonetheless implemented local syntactic analysis in the treatment of aspectual verbs and verbs of positive and negative recall, where the syntactic function of the *-ing* form as direct object of the main verb is put into relation with the main verb's meaning as the basis for the inferences drawn concerning the

temporal relation between the main verb's event and that expressed by the complement. I would argue that I have also developed new tools of syntactic analysis for the *to*-infinitive, demonstrating that it is not the direct object of the main verb, but rather a goal- or result-specifier, and showing how this accounts for the fact that its event is always understood to be somehow subsequent to that of the main verb. In another monograph, I have demonstrated that all of the purportedly syntactic cases of subject and non-subject control in English can be explained by linguistic-semantic and pragmatic factors (Duffley 2014).

Regarding the commentator's defense of formal semantics, I have important reservations concerning the very vague and liberal definition that is proposed of this type of approach as corresponding to "any theory that characterizes meanings as mediated by an interpretation function." (p. 158) Here are the definitions of formal semantics from the *Cambridge Handbook of Formal Semantics* and the *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Language*:

> Formal semantics is an approach to semantics, the study of meaning, with roots in logic, the philosophy of language, and linguistics. The word *formal* in "formal semantics" is opposed to *informal* and reflects the influence of logic and mathematics in the rise of scientific approaches to philosophy and to linguistics in the twentieth century.
> (Aloni and Dekker 2016: 3)

> Formal semantics is the discipline that employs techniques from symbolic logic, mathematics, and mathematical logic to produce precisely characterized theories of meaning for natural languages (i.e. naturally occurring languages such as English, Urdu, etc.) or artificial languages (i.e. first-order predicate logic, computer programming languages etc.).
> (Lepore and Smith 2008: 557)

As one can see from these definitions, symbolic logic and mathematics are foundational components of this approach to language. They also underpin the commentator's approach to semantics.

One of the objectionable influences of symbolic logic on his/her analyses is the absolute priority accorded to the truth-functional dimension of language, leading to the artificial separation of use-conditions from truth-conditions, with the former being treated as an additional interpretational function added on to the truth-functional one. While I am open to a multi-dimensional characterization of linguistic meaning in which linguistic form is in relation to truth-conditional content, use-conditional content and discourse-functional content all at the same time, I fail to see why the commentator feels that "operators belonging in the truth-conditional dimension cannot affect use-conditional meanings" (p. 166), as if there had to be an impenetrable barrier between them. If several dimensions are bundled together by being correlated with the same linguistic form, one would expect there to be some coherence and unity among them. These considerations raise reservations concerning the commentator's analysis of the Spanish sentence in (1) below as involving two completely separate meanings, one truth-conditional, on which (1) has

an identical meaning to (2), and another use-conditional, on which (1) and (2) have different meanings since the second utterance conveys respect for Ana where the first one does not:

(1) Vi a Ana.

(2) Vi a doña Ana.

The only viewpoint in which such a division can be made is the perspective of a logician rather than an ordinary speaker. Indeed, one finds ordinary speakers sayings things like (3) below:

(3) Ahora   casi   casi   ya no   es   Don,   es simplemente Alejandro.
(https://improsofia.wordpress.com › tag),

in order to convey the message that Alejandro, who is the CEO of the company, behaves in a very warm and friendly way with the speaker, who almost considers him as a friend. Similarly, (4) conveys the message that what the speaker is drinking is not vulgar, ordinary beer, but rather something of a higher quality:

(4) ¡¡no es birra, es CERVEZA. La mejor que probé lejos!!!
(https://www.facebook.com/1073233856079599/photos/1083216655081319/)

In the meaning of the word *birra*, the referential truth-conditional dimension is bundled together with the perspectival use-condition dimension. Only a logician would think of separating the two.

I appreciated the analysis of proper names and the conditions under which they can be used with predicative meaning. I feel however that the analysis operates on a level which is too abstract as far as the referential meaning is concerned. In a use such as:

(5) Ann saw Alfred,

the meaning of *Alfred* is constituted by the entirety of the speaker's knowledge of a particular person belonging to their network of acquaintances and in fact this name only has meaning within a restricted sub-community of speakers. In a use such as (6), on the other hand, the meaning of this form is 'generic person bearing the name Alfred' and the speaker does not have to know the Alfreds in question:

(6) There are two Alfreds working in this studio.

I might add that the type of syntactic context favouring the realization of the predicative sense is broader than merely requiring the presence of a constituent expressing number, as it is also found where this notion is not present:

(7) My boss is Alfred incarnate[1].

This does not invalidate however the general type of

---

[1] Compare this attested use from the Internet:

> Benson asks in his short commentary on his piece that if Trump is Hitler incarnate, then what does that say about his supporters?

> (https://www.cram.com/essay/Debates-Between-Hitler-And-Hitler/F3DXAWX3GYKW)

approach advocated by the author concerning this question.

  As a final note, I would like to rectify a misunderstanding that led the commentator to find "unpersuasive" (p. 162) my argument that autonomous syntax, and the interpretative view of semantics that goes with it, has no cognitive plausibility because the desire to express meaning is what causes the speaker to construct an utterance. The commentator states: "our 'desire' to express meaning is to a great extent independent of the means we use to express those meanings." Two comments are in order here. First of all, it is not the mere desire to express something, but the intended message which is the object of that desire, which represents the final cause of the speaker's utterance, i.e. what the speaker is aiming to convey. Secondly, no speaker is going to aim at conveying an intended message that they do not have the linguistic means to express. What is more, we are constantly viewing the world through the lens of the meanings of the words of our language. As formulated most recently by Hirtle (2013: 76), "our stream of consciousness is constantly being monitored by our viewing ideas, with the result that anything in it we focus on – whether we want to speak about it or not – is, *ipso facto*, re-cognized as belonging to a certain type, class, category, etc., i.e. identified as being somehow similar to other entities." This fact has been recognized by Whorf (1964: 213)[2], Gethin (1999: 52)[3], Lucy

---

[2] "The world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds – and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds."

[3] "The world doesn't come to us already sliced up into objects and experiences; what counts as an object is already a function of our system of representation, and how we perceive the world in our experience is influenced by that system of representation."

and Gaskins (2003: 487)[4], and Taylor (2000: 47)[5]. This diminishes even further the plausibility of the hypothesis that the syntax of human language can be treated as autonomous from the meanings of the words assembled by it.

References

Aloni, Maria & Paul Dekker. 2016. *Cambridge handbook of formal semantics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Duffley, Patrick. 2014. *Reclaiming control as a semantic and pragmatic phenomenon*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Gethin, Amorey. 1999. *Language and thought: a rational inquiry into their nature and relationship*. Exeter, UK: Intellect.

Lepore, Ernest & Barry C. Smith. 2008. *The Oxford handbook of philosophy of language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lucy, John A. & Suzanne Gaskins. 2003. Interaction of language type and referent type in the development of nonverbal classification preferences. In Gentner, Dedre & Susan Goldin-Meadow (eds.) *Language and mind: advances in the study of language and thought*, 465-492. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

---

[4] "A vision of reality emerges through the 'window of language'."

[5] "A person has to mould his conceptualizations to match the symbolic resources made available to him by his language. English forces its speakers to make the conceptual distinction between snails and slugs; German does not."

Saab, Andrés. (2022), "Do Linguistic Meanings Meet Linguistic Form?", *Manuscrito*, v. 45, n. 1, 155-174.

Taylor, John R. 2000. *Possessives in English: an exploration in Cognitive Grammar.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Whorf, Benjamin Lee. 1964. *Language, thought, and reality: selected writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf.* In Carroll, John B. (ed.). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.