

Direct Compositionality: Why and, Is there any reason why not?

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The hypothesis of direct compositionality is the hypothesis that the syntax and semantics work together directly: the syntax can be seen as a system that “builds” (i.e., proves well-formed) expressions often on the basis of smaller expressions and the semantics works directly with this to assign a model-theoretic interpretation to each expression as it is “built” in the syntax. This eliminates the need for any sort of intermediate level of representation such as Logical Form (LF) mediating between the actual (surface) expressions and their interpretation, and hence also eliminates the need for rules mapping expressions into LFs. In fact, if coupled with a fairly strong view of what the syntax can do, this view also entails that representations (such as trees) are nothing more than representations of the way in which the grammar worked to prove an expression well-formed and a (somewhat rough) representation of how the compositional semantics worked. They are not something that the grammar “sees”, manipulates, or states constraints on.

This talk will first elucidate these remarks, arguing that this is the simplest conception of the organization of the grammar and the one which should be discarded only in the face of strong evidence to the contrary. From there I will discuss (albeit briefly) a few phenomena that have classically been thought to challenge the hypothesis of direct compositionality (and the claim that trees are not something that the grammar “sees”) and will show that the direct compositional view (coupled with a fairly constrained view of what the syntax can do) can provide perfectly simple alternative analyses of the relevant phenomena. My primary case study will be the analysis of “short answers” to questions. The correct analysis of short answers interacts with the hypothesis of direct compositionality in three interesting ways. First, direct compositionality leads to the conclusion that these cannot involve ellipsis - and I will argue that indeed there is no semantic reason to posit ellipsis. Second, the standard syntactic arguments for ellipsis disappear in any case under the direct compositional worldview. Third, I give some new evidence against the ellipsis analysis of short answers: and show that this in turn provides evidence *for* direct compositionality.