

Copredication: quantificational issues and methodological implications

Copredication (Pustejovsky 1995, 236) is the phenomenon whereby two (or more) predicates are applied to a single argument and make apparently conflicting semantic requirements of that argument, in a sentence that is nevertheless coherent and possibly true. For example, in (1) 'delicious' requires that 'lunch' refer to food, while 'took forever' requires that it refer to an event.

(1) Lunch was delicious but took forever.

(Asher 2011, 11)

In this talk I will focus on issues of individuation and counting in copredication. Many quantified copredication sentences have truth conditions that cannot be accounted for given standard assumptions, because the predicates used impose different criteria of individuation on their argument. For example, while (2) could be true in a situation involving three copies of the same book (three books individuated physically, one book individuated informationally), and (3) could be true in a situation involving three books printed in a single volume (three books individuated informationally, one book individuated physically), (4) would be true in neither situation, since it requires the three books in question to be both physically and informationally distinct.

(2) Three books are heavy.

(3) Three books are informative.

(4) Three books are heavy and informative.

I will present a theory that compositionally derives the correct truth conditions for sentences like (2)–(4), based on formalizing criteria of individuation as equivalence relations on subsets of the domain of discourse, and incorporating them into lexical entries.

In the light of this theory, I will also discuss the argument (made by Chomsky (2000), Collins (2009), and Pietroski (2005), for example) that copredication makes it impossible to maintain an 'externalist' view of semantic theory – that is, one according to which a proper explanation of semantic competence must include relations between either words or their mental encodings and things in the world (Collins, 2009, 55). I will argue that the effort to maintain externalistic viability is good methodology for semantic theory.

References

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