

Book Review

Semantics, Metasemantics, Aboutness

By Ori Simchen.

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A Review By

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While studies in truth-conditional semantics are about meaning and truth conditions, more philosophically basic studies in metasemantics are instead about how semantic endowment can be possible. Metasemantics can, therefore, be considered “the metaphysics of semantic endowment” (*p.1*). It is generally recognized in the academic field that there are two competing metasemantic theories; productivism and interpretationism (*pp.1-2*). In the present book, Ori Simchen offers a decisive argument to persuade the readers to accept that, in the end, metasemantic interpretationism will be defeated by metasemantic productivism. Moreover, the perspective of metasemantics is related with the explanation of aboutness which is the main theme from his previous book in philosophy of intentionality (Simchen, 2015).

When I make an assertion, say, there is a stone right in front of me, I know that my assertion is with meaning because the real-world situation fits in well with what I have just said. However, when I ask further about how it is possible that the meaning is engaged with those words in the assertion, I am instead asking a question in metasemantics. From Burgess and Sherman’s conceptualization, studies in metasemantics are, again, “metaphysical explanations of semantics facts” (Burgess and Sherman, 2014: 2). So, the point of my assertion with the very semantic token of the word ‘stone’ standing for the solid object in front of me can be considered a fact of meaning. The question in metasemantics is asking how the fact is metaphysically possible.

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In the first chapter, the main thing that Simchen argues is that Lewisian approach of ‘reference magnetism’ in theories of meaning cannot be called the sole and valid theory in metasemantics. This is because reference magnetism is just only an approach in interpretationism (pp. 7-8; p. 14). Moreover, Lewisian reference magnetism cannot deal with the problem of indeterminacy in singular reference. Simchen’s example of the meaning of ‘this’ in “This is a piece of fruit” can be interpreted in various ways according to the subsentential expressions from many speakers, so interpretationism is prone to indeterminacy (pp.39-40). However, if a speaker’s intention of what is being referred by the word ‘this’ is employed here as a factor explained in the productivist theory, the problem will be solved (pp.51-53).

In chapter 3, Simchen offers his argument to show that metasemantic productivism is associated with contemporary truth-conditional semantics (pp. 64-69). Moreover, metasemantics is engaged in the explication of what it is about whenever we talk about things, i.e. the explication of aboutness. From my intuition, if I said ‘I lost my home key’, I must have already known what I was talking about and what the meaning of the utterance was even though it was possible that what I said was in fact false because of my false memory (*an example adapted from pp. 71-74*). This is what is called by Simchen “our intuitive verdicts of aboutness” that is associated with metasemantics (p. 91).

Next, Simchen offers two case studies of self-reference and legal interpretation in chapter 4 and 5, respectively. His main thesis in chapter 4 is that the explanation of self-reference from token-reflexivity is wrong. Again, referential tokens should be more advantageously explained in the light of productivism (p. 114). The book concludes in chapter 6 with the problem of semantic indeterminacy especially found in the famous example of Willard Van Orman Quine’s cat Tabitha whether the name of Tabitha refers to *the cat* or *the whole cosmos minus the cat* (Quine, 1990/ 1992: 33; italics here are mine). The main argument from Quine is that there is no fact to determine to which one the name is exactly referring. Simchen disagrees with it. The fact exists although we cannot come to know about it. In metasemantic productivism, there is “semantic requirement of locality-per-reference on sentential truth” that is independent from any interpretations (pp.146-149).

In my opinion, there is one point that is still missing in the present book of Simchen. It is about the comprehensibility of our talking about non-existent objects. It can be considered that a number of non-existent objects are from our imagination, so they are not presented from each of us in the total sameness of characteristics. Nevertheless, the talk about non-existent objects can be intelligible among us. Therefore, it is also good to know what the aboutness in the case of talking about

non-existent objects is, and how it is possible to explain the semantic endowment in talking about non-existent objects in terms of productivist theory.

Not only beginners in philosophy but also skilled readers who can follow those elaborate details of philosophical arguments may find this book rather difficult to cope with. However, if the accusation of difficulty is put forward to reduce its philosophical value, Simchen will surely reject it. He argues that, for an advancement in philosophy itself, to do philosophy is to be responsible in dealing with these complex issues (p. ix). I totally agree with him on the point.

References

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