

CENTER FOR COGNITIVE SCIENCE

University at Buffalo, State University of New York

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280 Park Hall
North Campus
2:00 pm –4:00 pm

A Philosophical Look at Compositionality

Jeff Pelletier

**Depts. Philosophy, Computing Science
University of Alberta, Canada**

Although it sounds like the start of a bad joke, I think it is true to say that there are two types of people in the (academic) world: those who look to the 'parts' of objects/phenomena they wish to explain or understand, and those who look to the way an object/phenomenon 'fits in with' other aspects of the world. Let's call these two groups "atomists" and "contextualists". There are various subtypes within each of the groups, and I wish to pick out the 'compositionalists' from within the atomistic group for further discussion.

My interest is with their views on the explanation of "meaning" in the realm of theories of natural language understanding. As a first pass, their view is that "the meaning of a complex expression is a function of the meanings of the parts, plus the mode of combination of those parts". This formulation leaves a number of issues open, and gives rise to differing accounts of the issue of semantic compositionality.

Besides trying to get straight on just what semantic compositionality is, I intend to discuss certain linguistic phenomena that have been brought forward as examples that show it to be "empirically false". I will consider what compositionalists might say about such examples, and I will consider whether the strategies they might invoke amount to showing that there is no empirical issue involved at all. In this realm, I will also look at certain formal accounts of semantics that purport to show that "any semantics can be converted to a compositional semantics"...and that therefore there is no empirical content to the compositional/non-compositional debate.

In the end I will advocate a certain attitude toward semantic phenomena: they are best explained by an atomistic, but non-compositional theory.

**Refreshments will be available
Everyone is welcome!**

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<http://wings.buffalo.edu/cogsci/html/2002spring.htm>