Radicalizing the interface: a case study of intensionality

The ‘radical’ model of syntax-semantics in Chomsky (2007) maintains that, modulo lexical semantics, there is no autonomous semantic component. Rather, the grammar is itself ‘substance-based’ and the syntax organises semantic information of a uniquely grammatical kind. We examine the implications of this model for intensionality. Frege noted that sentences do not have their ordinary semantic values in embedded positions. This fact can be formally modelled in a variety of ways: the semantic values of these expressions can be substituted for others, or a different rule of semantic composition can be postulated. While there is no doubt that intensionality can be formally captured in these ways, we contend that these approaches fail to explain the origin (and indeed pervasiveness) of intensionality.

In principle, the origin of intensionality could be semantic or grammatical, but there is no obvious semantic reason why it should exist. Indeed, the phenomenon has puzzled compositional semanticists for a century, and they have mostly attempted to discuss it away (e.g. direct reference theories, or Davidson’s paratactic theory), turning intensionality into a kind of anomaly. Evidence that the intensionality arises as a result of syntactic structure-building comes from five sources. First, if a clause occurs as a parenthetical, adjunct, or paratactic unit, and hence the syntactic ‘connex’ is weakened, intensionality disappears (e.g., (1)-(3)), suggesting that the effect does not wholly reduce to the meanings of the lexical items involved. Secondly, the lexical meaning of this verb is consistent with truth conditions for (4) equivalent with those of (5). Thirdly, intensionality arises wherever there is embedding: e.g., (6) is a complex nominal referring to a certain vase – of which the DP ‘the table’ provides a certain description. The DP is intensional in this sense, i.e. not independently referential when embedded, much as an embedded clause functions as an (intensional) description of the referent of the matrix verb, a certain (mental) event. Fourthly, referentiality itself relies on grammatical structure. A bare N, for example, is never referential, and syntax mediates nominal reference (Longobardi 2005). Fifth, intensionality arises only around the fourth year, when the child masters recursive complementation (de Villiers, 2007).

Recent approaches suggest that the phenomenon in question corresponds one-to-one with a syntactic fact, namely that of being an embedded clause (Larson 2002; 2011; Den Dikken, et al. 1996). Evidence for this comes from the fact that many so-called intensional transitive verbs (ITVs) actually involve concealed clausal complements. But there are (familiar) problems facing the concealed clause analysis of some ITV (notably need and look for), concerning quantifier scope and adverbial modification. Moreover, the notion of clause here must cover a plethora of vastly different structures, with varying degrees of intensionality (complements of ECM and raising verbs, small clauses, restructuring complements, factive and non-factive clauses, certain gerunds). In fact, it is not the case that all embedded clauses are intensional (7) and nor is it the case that all intensional phrases are clausal (8). The sententialist hypothesis is particularly problematic in languages with rich clausal nominalisation.

We argue that intensionality is the systematic consequence of how the grammar combines units with referential significance, i.e. phases, under the constraints of a single-cycle architecture (Chomsky 2007). If every phase converts a predicative expression into a referential one, and referentiality arises only at the edge (Arsenijevic & Hinzen 2011; Sheehan & Hinzen 2011), no embedded phase will ever be fully referential. There are, however, grammatical means of alleviating intensionality via narrow syntactic dependencies. More specifically, one important factor, which cuts through the clausal/nominal distinction, is whether the phrase in question has dependent tense. Phrases with dependent temporal reference form a dependency with the matrix event, and so are more extensional (9)-(10)). Phrases with independent temporal reference fail to form such a dependency and so remain more intensional ((11)-(12)).
1) Lois, who Superman/Clark is holding in his arms, has fainted.
2) Because Superman/Clark was hungry, he ate a pie.
3) Superman/Clark is injured and Lois really regrets it.
4) Mary believes someone is injured.
5) Someone is injured and Mary believes it.
6) The vase on the table
7) Lois started [kissing Superman/Clark Kent/a (#non-specific) friend of hers].
8) Lois is sorry *(about) kissing Superman/#Clark Kent/a friend of hers.
9) *I’m sitting next to/in the room with [John’s boss last year]
10) *This morning Lois started [PRO hitting Superman tomorrow]
11) I’m looking for/ picturing/imagining [John’s boss last year] right now.
12) This morning Lois regrets [PRO hitting Superman yesterday]

References


