

Semantics in generative grammar

A critical survey

Enrico Cipriani

I provide a critical survey of the role that semantics took in the several models of generative grammar, since the 1950s until the Minimalist Program. I distinguish four different periods. In the first section, I focus on the role of formal semantics in generative grammar until the 1970s. In Section 2 I present the period of linguistic wars, when the role of semantics in linguistic theory became a crucial topic of debate. In Section 3 I focus on the formulation of conditions on transformations and Binding Theory in the 1970s and 1980s, while in the last Section I discuss the role of semantics in the minimalist approach. In this section, I also propose a semantically-based model of generative grammar, which fully endorses minimalism and Chomsky's later position concerning the primary role of the semantic interface in the Universal Grammar modelization (Strong Minimalist Thesis). In the Discussion, I point out some theoretical problems deriving from Chomsky's internalist interpretation of model-theoretic semantics.

Keywords: semantic markers, theta-theory, deep structure, minimalist program, logical form

1. The semantic component in the first phase of generative grammar

In *Syntactic Structures* (1957), Chomsky defined a grammar as “a device that generates all of the grammatical sequences of [a language] L and none of the ungrammatical ones” (p.13), and assumed that the formulation of the grammar is not influenced by semantics: the grammar for a language L must be chosen on the basis of its role in generating all the *grammatical* (not meaningful) sentences of L. According to this assumption, semantic intuitions are a corollary of linguistic theory: “there is little evidence that ‘intuition about meaning’ are at all useful in the actual investigation of linguistic form” (p.94).

Chomsky argued that formal semantics had no role in linguistic theory. The reasons of this judgment were explained in Chomsky's, 1955 reply to Bar-Hillel's

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