

Truth and the Compositionality Principle: A Reply to Palmer

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I believe that most of Palmer's points in his critique of my paper stem from a lack of understanding of the arguments supporting my thesis, and his critique shows that I have not been sufficiently clear. Since the issue appears to be of some importance for the description of semantics let me restate briefly my thesis and my strategy for proving it. In the process I will address Palmer's most important counterarguments. In addition in the last section I will discuss the implication of the hypothesis for the widely accepted compositionality principle.

The hypothesis: The unmarked indicative sentence indicates the intended truth.

2. Speaker's attitude toward the truth of a proposition

Palmer states that the first evidence for my hypothesis comes from contrasting the marked with the unmarked forms. Not so. The evidence comes from the explanation for hitherto unnoticed semantic properties. The fundamental facts with respect to this piece of evidence are the following: In Polish, Czech, and Mopun (Chadic, not Bantu!) there exist grammatical means to express the speaker's doubt about the truth of what somebody has said. These means were illustrated in my paper in the context of complements of verbs of saying, equivalents of the English 'X said that S'. These structures have been chosen for two reasons. The first is that they are always pragmatically plausible. One does not have to produce a lengthy story in order to have a felicitous use of such sentences. The other reason is that they provide an excellent context for differentiation between two types of utterances. This appropriate context may be compared to the use of some special process in chemistry in order to show the difference between two substances that would appear the same without an application of such

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a process. In the three languages discussed the speaker can always doubt the truth of the proposition made by a second or third person. In Polish and Czech, when the markers of 'doubt' are used with the first person subject of the main clause they do not indicate doubt but rather they indicate that the speaker was lying. When a form indicating doubt is used with the first person subject of the main clause in Mopun the sentence is simply ungrammatical. Since my paper was published I have discovered that the same holds for Turkish, which has a form *miş* indicating doubt, e.g.,

- (1) a. *Hastayım*
 'I am sick'
 b. *Hastaymışım*
 'They say I am sick' (Underhill 1967:195)

This form can be used with the third person subject of the main clause, example (2a) but cannot be used with the first person subject, example (2b):

- (2) a. *o dedi ki gidecekmış*
 3sg say Compl go-Fut-3sg-Doubt
 'He said that he will go'
 b. **ben dedim ki gidecekmişim*
 1sg say Compl go-Fut-Doubt-1sg

Note that if one is sure about the truth of the proposition then (1a) cannot be used and instead one has to say:

- (3) a. *o gideceğini söyledi*
 he go-Fut-3sg say-3sg
 'He said that he will go'

Instead of (2b) one can use (3b) without of course any notion of doubt:

- (3) b. *ben dedim-ki gideceğim*
 I say-1sg go-Fut-1sg
 'I said that I will go'

The question that needs to be answered is why the same forms that indicate doubt about the truth when used with second and third person subjects indicate a lie or render the sentence ungrammatical when used with the first person subject. It is unlikely that the phenomenon is accidental because it occurs in languages from three families not in contact with each other. Since the only difference between the two sentences is the person of

the subject of the main clause, there must be some property that involves differences in the epistemological attitudes of the speaker toward what somebody said and towards the speaker's own statement. The source of these differences must be an inherent property of indicative sentences of such nature, that when the property is combined with the notion of doubt the result is a lie or an ungrammatical sentence. The only property that can produce such effects is the notion of truth. Ungrammaticality then will be explained by a contradiction between two opposing meanings, and the change of meaning from doubt about truth into lying will be explained by a semantic shift that quite often occurs when two forms encoding opposing values of the same semantic feature cooccur.

Note that Palmer in his counterarguments does not provide any explanation for the difference in meaning depending on the subject of the main clause.

Although the evidence for the meaning of the indicative sentence was provided on the basis of an examination of a very specific environment, that does not mean that the hypothesis does not apply to indicative sentences in other environments. The specific environment provides just the evidence that may be missing in other environments.

3. *Meaning of the unmarked form*

Palmer asserts, without providing any evidence, that 'the unmarked form makes no claim at all about the relevant feature (here the truth of the proposition reported)'. There is an interesting paradox here: Believing in Palmer's assertion, we could conclude that he is not committed to the truth of his assertion, and therefore there is nothing to discuss. But in order to pursue the argument I have to assume that he actually thinks that what he says is true; indeed later he states: 'The notion that formally unmarked indicates semantically unmarked is not only plausible in itself, but also allows a simple explanation of the marked forms'. Palmer's a priori assertion may be valid for some features of some languages. Thus in Pero (cf. Frajzyngier in press) the morphologically unmarked form of noun is semantically unmarked for the feature number. The language has no morphological devices to mark the noun for number. An obvious example where Palmer's assertion is false is the case of nouns in English: The great majority of them are morphologically unmarked and yet semantically marked as singular. Some nouns, however, are semantically marked as mass, and

when a plural marker is added to them the resulting meaning differs from the resulting meaning of the remaining nouns with a plural marker, e.g., sand-sands, oil-oils, fish-fishes. In Frajzyngier 1985 a. and b. I have proposed the use of marking devices in order to find out not only the meaning of the marked form but also the meaning of the unmarked form. Briefly, if we have a form whose meaning is unknown, and we add to it another form whose meaning is known, and we know the meaning of the resulting construction, then it is very reasonable to assume that the meaning of the unknown form is the total meaning of the construction minus the meaning of the added element.

If Palmer's assertion were true we would not be able to predict the meaning of most syntactic and morphological derivations. Thus when a negative morpheme is added to an unmarked indicative sentence, according to Palmer, we would not be in position of knowing what is being denied, while in fact we know precisely that what is being denied is the truth of the proposition. If we add the negative marker to forms often labeled 'subjunctive' in many languages what is being denied is not the truth. The resulting meaning is one of prohibition. Similarly with the yes/no questions. If we were to accept Palmer's assertion, we would never really know that such questions are about the truth of the proposition rather than about anything else.

Palmer asserts that he has a 'positive evidence for the claim that the indicative sentence is quite neutral in the indication of truth'. The evidence is supposed to come from languages that have no devices to indicate doubt truth, and therefore the speaker 'cannot use a grammatical device to indicate his commitment to the proposition that he reports'. This is the case of non sequitur. The fact that there are no means to indicate doubt in truth does not mean that there is no other evidence about the meaning of the indicative sentence. Moreover, since Palmer does not give an example, the name of the language, or a reference where one could find a description of such a language, his 'positive evidence' is at best hypothetical.

4 *Palmer's lesser counterarguments*

The counterargument based on sentences:

- (4) a. John came this morning.
- b. It is true that John came this morning.

Contrary to Palmer, the function of (4b) is not to indicate explicitly the notion of "true" (*sic*), but rather to deny somebody's claim about the fallacy of (4a). The evidence for this is the fact that (4b) cannot be felicitously used without a previous conversation involving in one way or another the proposition contained in (4a).

I agree with Palmer that the notion of indicative is not completely clear. It has been used as referring to the meaning of the sentence (e.g. American Heritage Dictionary) or to the form of the verb (e.g., Kuryłowicz 1964), Lyons 1977 uses the term in both senses (p. 752, 848). I could use the term *declarative* as proposed in Lyons provided it will not include the subjunctive and other marked forms. The forms marked with modals are both morphosyntactically and semantically marked and therefore do not constitute declarative/indicative sentences. This eliminates from the discussion Palmer's Spanish example with the subjunctive. I do agree with Palmer that the notion of indicative, and in particular the problem of its scope, should be narrowed, but I believe that it should be done with reference to a specific language.

It appears that we do not differ with respect to languages with 'evidentials'. I have discussed them exactly because of the concerns that Palmer repeats in his paper.

5. *Additional implication: the compositionality principle*

In my paper I have mentioned the implication of the truth hypothesis for transformational grammar. One of Palmer's counterarguments is based on the markedness properties, and I have dealt with them above. The other counterargument is that since the T.G. approach agrees with the one he has argued for, therefore this approach is correct. This counterargument hinges on the validity of Palmer's assertion, which has been shown to be wrong.

The hypothesis about the meaning of the unmarked indicative sentence contradicts the widely though not universally accepted principle attributed to Frege that 'The meaning of the complex expression should be a function of the meaning of its parts' (Allwood et al. 1981:130) or 'the meaning of the whole is a function of the meaning of the parts and the way they are put together' (Dowty 1978:4). It is not entirely clear in this principle what is understood by the term 'part'. It appears, however, that it refers to the overtly marked constituents, or at least to the 'higher constituents' in a sentence representation (cf. Rigter and Beukema 1985:145). If this is the case,

then truth is not a part of the sentence because it is not overtly marked by any particular constituent but is rather an attribute of the whole sentence. Hence the compositionality principle would have to be modified in such a way that the meaning of parts of the sentence constitutes only one part of the total meaning of the sentence. The other part would be the epistemological value of the sentence, i.e., the speaker's attitude toward the proposition, and possibly some other components. In this way we will be able to describe the meaning of a sentence in a much fuller way than it is possible within the existing frameworks. Although my hypothesis about the meaning of the indicative sentence requires the modification of the principle attributed to Frege it agrees with what Frege has actually said: 'One can, indeed, say: "The thought, that 5 is a prime number, is true". But closer examination shows that nothing more has been said than in a simple sentence "5 is a prime number". The truth claim arises in each case from the form of the declarative sentence, and when the latter lacks its usual force, [...]' (Frege (1892) 1960: 126).

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