

MELONS, WATERMELONS AND RED WATERMELONS: A CASE AGAINST COMPOSITIONALITY? COMMENTS ON SIEBEL

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Siebel's exposition of the Principle of Compositionality (PC), the main argument against it and Fodor's reply and its virtues, is extremely clear, so I go direct to the problem. I'll make, first, some comments on ambiguity for I think that some aspects of the problem, and the persuasive part of Lahav's objections, have to do with it; then I'll focus on Siebel's worries about Fodor's reply, and I'll defend that an improved version of the Fodorian approach shows that such worries are unsound.

First, ambiguity. It is obvious that seeming violations of PC are not really so but cases of ambiguity: the understanding of 'solvent bank' and 'wooded valley', plus grammar, is not sufficient for the understanding of 'wooded bank'; the understanding of 'blue feeling' and 'large jacket', plus grammar, is not sufficient for the understanding of 'blue jacket'. Of course the seeming failures of compositionality here are not so but only a consequence of the ambiguity of 'bank' and 'blue'.

I think that something similar happens with 'red' in 'red car' and 'red watermelon'. The expression

(1) 'red P'

is ambiguous. The more obvious source of ambiguity is made explicit in the following three interpretations:

(2) 'x is a red P' = 'x is P and every part of x is red'

(3) 'x is a red P' = 'x is P and some part of x is red'

(4) 'x is a red P' = 'x is P and its P-color-relevant part is red'

I take this ambiguity as uncontroversial and context-dependent as previous ones. The only difference (that may explain that some speakers in some

contexts are not sensitive to the ambiguity) is that now, contrary to before, there are logical relations among them: (2) implies (4) which in turn implies (3). Every one of these three interpretations is compositional, but of course compositionality "fails" when we shift from one interpretation to another. (All three interpretations share a common core: 'x'salient part is red', which can be seen as the common meaning of 'x is a red P'; in (2) the salient part is the whole, i.e. every part, in (3) is any, and in (4) is some specific P-relevant part).

If I understand Fodor's "red watermelon is red for watermelons" well, his answer takes into account only (4), and perhaps he is right and in the majority of contexts the majority of competent english speakers understand (4). In this case, as he insists, meaning is perfectly compositional though application may be not, we may have failures of compositional application that are not cases of semantic incompetence: (provided the knowledge of grammar) it is true that a competent speaker can *apply* correctly 'red car' and 'watermelon' but incorrectly 'red watermelon', but she can not *understand* 'red car' and 'watermelon' without understand 'red watermelon', in a given context. I say in a given context because it may be that "the P-color-relevant part" varies from context to context. So, if we take a watermelon with a black pulp and red skin, 'this is a red watermelon' can be true in a given context either because in that context the interpretation is (3), or because the interpretation is (4) but the watermelon-color-relevant part in such context is the skin.

Though less manifest, the same ambiguities apply to the other *relative adjective* of the examples, i.e. 'large'. The more obvious interpretation of

(5) 'large P'

is the Fodorian "a P which is large for Ps", which must be read in the following way:

(6) 'x is a large P' = 'x is P and (significantly) larger than a standard P'

Under a quick look this expression seems not ambiguous but only relativized to a parameter ('standard P') that the context must fix (it is also vague because of 'significantly'). So, there seems to be an asymmetry between 'large' and 'red'. But I think that Siebel is right when he points to the two dimensional nature of these expressions. I think that if we pay attention to both dimensions, the asymmetry disappears and both cases are exactly alike.

The first dimension of 'red P' has to do with the *parts* or "constituents of the object in question that must be red" (p. 275). This dimension is included in ours (2)-(4). But there is another relevant dimension that has to do with *shades* of red. If we include this dimension in our (2-4) we obtain

- (7) 'x is a red P' = 'x is P and every part of x is P-shade-relevant red'
- (8) 'x is a red P' = 'x is P and some part of x is P-shade-relevant red'
- (9) 'x is a red P' = 'x is P and its P-color-relevant part is P-shade-relevant red'

Siebel says that in the case of 'large P' the size of a standard P "corresponds to the second dimension" of 'red P', i.e. the P-standard size is analogous to the P-relative shade. But he insists correctly that there is also "something which corresponds to the first dimension" involved in 'red P', namely, the "aspects" of the object (height, length, width) relevant to the size-comparison with the standard. Now we are in a position of identifying for 'large P' the same source of ambiguity we identified for 'red P' in (2)-(4). If we add this new second dimension to the already known first one, we obtain:

- (10) 'x is a large P' = 'x is P and every size-aspect of x is significantly larger than in a standard P'
- (11) 'x is a large P' = 'x is P and some size-aspect of x is significantly larger than in a standard P'
- (12) 'x is a large P' = 'x is P and its P-size-relevant aspect is significantly larger than in a standard P'

So, the seeming asymmetry between (4) and (6) is due to the fact that in 'red P' the more apparent relative dimension is the first while in 'large P' is the second. But if we make explicit both dimensions both cases are exactly alike. I take (9) and (12) as improved two-dimensional specifications of the general Fodorian "P which is Q for a P" for a specific Q (red, large).

Though in the majority of context (9) and (12) are the correct interpretations, I think that in some contexts (7) and (10), or (8) and (11), may be legitimate alternative interpretations, and that they may explain some persuasive intuitions behind Lahav's and Siebel's criticisms to PC. For instance, Siebel says that "Fodor's explanation of the expression 'large elephant' leaves it open to [Susan] whether it is a certain height, length, width or a combination of them which counts as large in the case of elephants" (p. 276). To me this has nothing to do with compositionality but with ambiguity, and the context must desambiguate and determine what counts:

every aspect; simply any of them; or some specific context-salient one. This is enough for ambiguity. With the improved version of the Fodorian account we can now deal with Siebel's worries about Fodor's defense of PC.

Siebel exposes extremely well the virtues of Fodor's approach, but then he shows some worries. These worries concern whether Fodor's proposal will pass standard tests for semantic understanding. Siebel focuses on two such tests. The first one demands that a person who understands the meaning of an expression must be capable of "provide a correct explanation of the expression". Under Fodor's proposal, Siebel says, a person who knows the meaning of 'large elephant' should explain that meaning saying that "a large elephant is an elephant which is large for elephants", which does not seem to him a good candidate to pass the first test: "This might be a better answer than the trivial (...) But I'm not sure whether we would accept it as an adequate explanation of what 'large elephant' means". He seems cautious, perhaps because intuitions about what counts as a correct explanation are difficult to set. But I think that the improved reading of Fodor's proposal provides reasons for discard this worry. According to this version, the full answer would be: "a large elephant is an elephant whose elephant-size-relevant aspect is larger than in a standard elephant". May be it is matter of different intuitions, but I would accept this answer as a perfectly adequate explanation of what 'large elephant' means (leaving other ambiguity possibilities aside). Because Siebel himself does not pursue this line of attack, I leave it here.

The main objection comes from the second test. According to it, "a competent speaker should be able to apply the expression successfully". Of course, Siebel says, "under certain conditions" must be added. He mentions two such conditions: (a) "the person knows enough about the object in order to come to a well-grounded decision"; and (b) "we should select only paradigms". Siebel argues that, even under such conditions, Fodor's meaning of 'large P' does not suffice for its successful application. Why does he say this? The only answer can be that, for him, knowledge about the actual medium size of Ps does not belong to the knowledge one must have "in order to come to a well-grounded decision" in the application of 'large P'. And this must be the reason why he sympathizes with those who include such knowledge in the semantic understanding of that expression.

The key point under discussion is whether knowledge about actual size of medium Ps belongs to the semantic understanding or, on the contrary, is encyclopedic. I think that (i) it is encyclopedic, not semantic, and (ii) it is

part of the knowledge under which the "successful application test" for understanding makes sense (it is inessential to my point whether it must be included in condition (a) or amounts to a third new condition). I shall conclude defending the second by means of an analogy and reminding a reason for the first.

The analogy is with descriptions. I take it that one can understand the meaning of a(n attributive) description without being *actually* capable of identifying the reference. In descriptions (and in many other cases) knowing the meaning does not suffice for the correct identification of the reference. I perfectly understand 'the first Spanish child born in 1999 is Catalan' and I can not identify the reference of the description. To do so, what I need is empirical, encyclopedic knowledge about the world. And this knowledge belongs to the knowledge under which the "successful application test" makes sense: only if such knowledge is provided, the explanation of *application failures* on the basis of *semantic incompetence* makes sense. I see this case exactly alike 'large P' (actually, I think that a fully precise Fodorian improved version includes descriptions). If we agree that this encyclopedic knowledge belongs to the test-conditions for the understanding of descriptions, I don't see why the knowledge about size of standard Ps does not belong to the test conditions for the understanding of 'large P'.

May be such knowledge does not belong to the empirical test-conditions because it is not empirical, encyclopedic, but semantic? The only thing I can do is to remind Siebel's exposition of Fodor's virtues: in such a case, 'standard elephants are more than 2m tall' would be analytic. What I don't see is how one and the same feature of Fodor's proposal can be a virtue and a problem at the same time: that knowledge about actual specific size of elephants does not belong to semantic knowledge but to encyclopedic one is the only explanation of why 'standard elephants are more than 2m tall' is not analytic. Are we ready to accept that 'the first Spanish child born in 1999 is Pere Casacuberta' is analytic? If the answer is "no", I don't see why we should say "yes" in the analog case for 'large P'.

I have no doubt about the importance of the issue Siebel points out in his last remarks, namely, the conflict between two notions of semantics. But, without additional reasons, I don't see that the case discussed gives any support to the friends of "broad semantics". To conclude: do red watermelons provide a case against compositionality? I don't think so. At least not because of 'red' (may be because of 'watermelon' but, as Siebel remind us, PC does not care noun-noun compounds).