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**Natural Language Ontology**

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**1. Introduction**

**1.1. Natural language ontology as an emerging discipline and practice**

Natural language ontologyis the study of the ontology (ontological categories, structures, and notions) reflected in natural language. As such, it is a sub-discipline of both philosophy and linguistics, more specifically, of natural language semantics and metaphysics.

Natural language ontology is a new discipline that has emerged with the development of natural language semantics over the last decades. It had been suggested as a discipline first by Bach (1986), who uses the term ‘natural language metaphysics’. The term ‘natural language metaphysics’ is in a sense more adequate than ‘natural language ontology’ in that ontology is generally taken to be narrower than metaphysics, dealing just with what there is rather than with the nature of things. However, ‘ontology’ is increasingly used in the broader sense of metaphysics as well, in particular when it has an empirical connection (such as ‘applied ontology’). Also ‘ontology’, being a count noun, is better usable as a term with a second meaning denoting the subject matter of the discipline or, in the plural, the subject matter of different branches of the discipline. Thus, ‘the ontology of natural language’will stand for the subject matter of natural language ontology, and we can talk about different *ontologies* being the subject matter of different branches of metaphysics, and perhaps even different *ontologies* being reflected in natural language (Section 4.3.)

Natural language ontology is not just an emerging discipline. It in a way has also been a practice throughout the history of philosophy. Philosophers throughout history, at times more often than others, have appealed to natural language to motivate an ontological view or notion, thus practicing natural language ontology. Appeals to natural language in the context of metaphysics can be found already in Aristotle and very explicitly in medieval metaphysics (Ockham, Aquinus, Buridan), in the phenomenological tradition (Brentano, Husserl, Meinong, Bolzano), as well as in early analytic philosophy (Frege, Twardowski, Strawson, Austin, Vendler, Ryle). What does such an appeal to natural language consist in? For example, it is a standard assumption in both philosophy and linguistics that referential noun phrases (NPs) stand for objects and predicates express properties of objects. The types of predicates acceptable with a particular sort of referential NP then are indicative of the ontological category the NP stands for. Philosophers thus often appeal to particular sorts of NPs when arguing for an ontology category, such as the category of properties (*wisdom*), events (*Socrates’ death*), tropes (*Socrates’ wisdom*), facts (*the fact that the sun is shining*), or numbers (*the number of planets*). There are many other ways than types of referential NPs, in which natural language appears to reflect ontology, as we will see.

**1.2. The ontology of natural language and its relation to reality**

The appeal to natural language in the history of philosophy used to be based on the assumption that natural language just reflects reality and that natural language thus provides a particularly manifest indication for the way reality should be understood. More recently, however, the view has established itself among philosophers that natural language does not in fact reflect the ontology of what there really is, or at least not fundamental reality. Rather natural language comes with its own ontology, an ontology that may be quite different from the ontology that some philosophers are willing to accept as the ontology of the real. For example, a lot of referential NPs in natural language seem to stand for entities that many philosophers would not consider real, let alone fundamental. These include ontologically dependent, minor, and derivative objects such as holes, shadows, smiles, homes, and mistakes, as well as construction-driven objects such as pluralities like ‘ the flowers in the garden’ (Section3.1.1.), functional, variable, or intensional objects like ‘the increasing temperature’, ‘the book John needs to write’ or ‘the gifted mathematician John claims to be’ (Section 3.1.1.), and intentional objects of the sort ‘the house John was dreaming about’ (Section 3.2.). Also categorial distinctions such as the mass-count distinction, which includes a distinction between ‘the water’ and ‘the quantity of water’ and ‘the clothes’ and ‘the clothing’, is not generally not taken to reflect an ontological distinction, but at best a distinction at a level of ‘grammaticized individuation’ or ‘language-driven ontology’ (Section 3.6.).

The apparent discrepancy between what is real and the ontology that natural language appears to display raises important questions itself. First of all, there is the question of how reality itself is to be understood. Does reality just consist in what is fundamental, and what exactly would that mean? Or does reality also include ordinary objects (and perhaps entities ontologically dependent on them)? Or should reality be understood as consisting of a much greater range of entities, a plentitude consisting of anything conceivable that meets the conditions for its existence, or perhaps a more restricted plentitude of such things? Should reality include a realm of mere possibilia and perhaps nonexistent, merely intentional objects? Some central issues in natural language ontology bear on the question of how reality and existence is to be understood. One of them is how natural language ontology is compatible with a fundamental requirement on semantic theory, that of giving truth conditions for sentences. For that, semantics, it seems, needs to involve real objects rather than just fictions, conceptual representations or merely conceived objects. Another is the question, skeptically addressed in particular by Chomsky, whether referential NPs generally are even used to refer to objects as part of reality and thus whether referentialist semantics is even possible (Section 2.2.5.).

**1.3. The ontology of natural language and truth conditions**

There are approaches to natural language semantics on which natural language ontology is pursued, but not the aim of giving truth conditions (whether it is set aside or abandoned). On one such approach, that of semantic internalism, natural language semantics should care only about our cognitive representation of things, not what there really is. On another approach, suggested by Bach (1986), natural language semantics should be agnostic as regards the entities with their structures and relations, that it posits, both regarding their ontological and cognitive status, as long as they are motivated by empirical generalizations and theoretical linguistic considerations. However, if the aim of semantics of giving truth conditions is shared, the question arises how the apparent discrepancy between the ontology displayed by natural language and what there really is should be understood? There are different options, each of which may be adopted for just part of the ontology reflected in natural language. One option is that natural language displays ontological notions or items that simply fail to be real, and thus speakers making use of them in their utterances are in error. Second, entities in the ontology of natural language may have the status of fictional entities, which means that sentences involving them cannot ‘really’ be true, but only in in the scope of a suitable intentional operator. Third, entities in the ontology of natural language may be considered derivative, yet real, and thus not fundamental, which would allow sentences involving them to be true. Finally, the discrepancy may consist in that natural language is selective as to the sorts of ontological notions and items it makes use of. This requires a suitably plenitudinous conception of reality, on which reality is richer than the ontology natural language displays. But giving truth conditions would be unproblematic.

**1.4. The ontology of natural language and cognition**

Sometimes the ontology natural language is taken to be just our cognitive ontology, in particular the ontology of ordinary objects. Cognitive ontology, however, needs to be distinguished from the ontology that is reflected in natural language. Cognitive ontology is based on language-independent intuitions and sensory seeming and is tied to perception and other language-independent cognition. The ontology of natural language is tied to language itself and as suc need not align with cognitive ontology. To give an example, it is generally agreed that the ontology of ordinary objects is not closed under sum formation: the sum of my room and the moon is not an object, and neither is there such a thing as the water in the cup and in the pool. But natural language appears to allow for unrestricted sum formation, most obviously with definite plural and mass NPs and conjunctions. Yet it is undeniable that there are interactions between the ontology reflected in cognition and the ontology of natural language, most obviously in the area of lexical semantics. In fact, often researchers pursuing natural language ontology take research in cognitive science into account or pursue interdisciplinary research in both areas at once.

The ontology tied to cognition should not be characterized as the ontology that non-philosophers (‘the folk’) naively accept when thinking about what there is; latter is the subject matter of folkmetaphysics. This distinction has a language-related analogue: the ontology of natural language cannot be characterized as the ontology reflected in naïve ontological theorizing using language. Thus a fundamental distinction needs to be drawn between a between ontology based on (linguistic or language-independent) intuitions and ontology based on reflection or reasoning, which is the basis of the latter (Section 5).

**1.5. The relevance of natural language ontology for philosophy**

Why should natural language ontology be pursued, and in particular why is its pursuit relevant to philosophy? First of all, given the development of theoretical linguistics over the last 70 years, the ontology of natural language should be recognized as an important field of study in itself, given its involvement in compositional semantics (Section 2.2.). Theoretical linguistics provides a wealth of relevant semantic and syntactic generalizations and theoretical considerations, permitting a more systematic study of the ontology implicit in natural language. And it may set its own ambitions regarding universals, its alignment with syntax, its relation to lexical semantics, and its connections to cognitive ontology.

There are also specific reasons for a philosopher to pursue natural language ontology. First of all, natural language ontology has an important contribution to make to descriptive metaphysics, metaphysics that aims to uncover the ontology reflected in common sense intuitions. Natural language ontology permits making intuitions manifest, in establishing stable judgments about the acceptability of natural language sentences. Natural language ontology, in fact, has often been pursued precisely for that purpose when discussing a range of ontological issues, such as ontological categories, existence, or parthood.

Second, a lot of topics in metaphysics have evolved around linguistic facts, generally used as manifestations of common sense intuitions or just reality. One example is the existence and nature of universals. Linguistic facts have played an important role in the debate surrounding universals at least since the middle ages: is *wisdom* a term that serves to picking out an abstract universal or just its various instances, the various wisdom manifestations? Another example is the existence and status of propositions, a topic where appeal to linguistic facts have played a central role in the debate at least since Frege: are *that*-clauses singular terms standing for abstract propositions, truth bearers that are both meanings of sentences and objects or contents of thought? Frege’s use of apparent number-referring terms such as *the number of planets* or bare numerals like *eight* has been influential in the debate of the existence and nature of numbers. If *the number of planets* stands for a number as an abstract object, are numbers obtainable from concepts, what Frege took *planets* to stand for? Is *eight* really a number-referring term or does it still retain its adjectival meaning even in referential position? Is *the number of planets* really a number-referring term or does it rather stand for a question about how many planets there are or the numerical aspect of the plurality of the planets? When metaphysical arguments rely on linguistic data, those data need to be subject to linguistic examination as well and thus of natural language ontology.

Third, metaphysical issues that relate to language may obtain a novel solution based on research in natural language ontology. For example, Twardowski (1911) argued for a novel category of products (as opposed to actions) based on a distinction between two sorts of nominalizations of attitude verbs (in English *judgment* vs *judging*, *claim* vs *claiming*, *request* vs *requesting*, though Twardowski used data from Polish, German, and French in three versions of the same article). Arguing thatproduct are the bearers of truth, Twardowski proposed a novel cognitively realistic yet not psychologistic account of the content of attitudes.

Fourth, natural language ontology may show that identity theories of various sorts are mistaken, if at least one of the items is part of the ontology of natural language. For example, using the methods of natural language ontology, it has been argued that artifacts cannot be identical to the matter they are made of (Fine 2003) and that events cannot just be space-time regions (Goldman 1977). One may also view Chomsky’s observations to the effect that water is not H2O, as showing that a substance that is part of natural language ontology (water) is not identical with a substance in the ontology of chemistry (H20) (Section 2.2.5.).

**2. Natural language ontology as a subdiscipline of both linguistics and philosophy**

Natural language ontology as a subdiscipline of both linguistics and philosophy raises a number of general questions. First, how does natural language ontology situate itself within metaphysics and how is it to be understood as a part of metaphysics? Second, how exactly does the semantics of natural language involve ontology and thus in what sense is natural language ontology part of linguistics? Third, what sorts of linguistic data reflect the ontology implicit in language, and how is that ontology itself to be characterized? In what follows, these questions will be addressed in turn.

**2.1. Natural language ontology as part of descriptive metaphysics**

How can natural language ontology be part of metaphysics, when the ontology of natural language may diverge from what is considered real? To answer this question requires clarifying how metaphysics itself is to be understood. A dominant view is that metaphysics is to be understood in term of its subject matter, its subject matter being that of fundamental reality: the task of metaphysics is, in Plato’s words, to ‘carve nature at its joints’,. But if the subject matter of metaphysics is fundamental reality, then natural language ontology will have no place in it.

This is not the only way of conceiving of metaphysics, however. There is an alternative conceptions of metaphysics which does not define it in terms of its subject matter being being fundamental reality) and within which natural language ontology can be situated. On the alternative, metaphysics has as its subject matter the general nature of things *as it is reflected* in particular ranges of ‘data’. Those data may consist in common sense intuitions or ordinary judgments, experiences (as in phenomenology), or in linguistic data (natural language ontology). On such an approach to metaphysics, it is left open what such data may reflect, whether it is fundamental reality, a realm of actual but derivative entities, entities constituted by the experience itself, or a realm of conceived reality. Older traditions of metaphysics that fall under the approach include the Kantian tradition, which deals, for example, with ontological categories, but as preconditions of accessing the world, rather than as categories of how things really are, as well as the phenomenological tradition (Brentano, Husserl), where ontology was also pursued, but based on how things appear, rather than assumptions about a mind-independent reality (and the way things appear in turn was taken to be constitutive of objects themselves). In contemporary analytic philosophy, Strawson’s (1950) notion of descriptive metaphysics most clearly focuses on what is reflected in data. The subject matter of descriptive metaphysics subject matter is what Strawson calls our ‘shared conceptual scheme’, or rather, less misleading (because metaphysics is not about representations or concepts, but things and their nature), the ontology reflected in shared commensense intuitions or ordinary judgments. Strawson contrasts descriptive metaphysics with what he calls ‘revisionary metaphysics’, which does not aim to uncover the ontology reflected in data, but rather aims to develop a better metaphysics. Strawson does not elaborate how ‘better’ is to be understood, but it is likely meant to be metaphysics that better carves nature at its joints, or perhaps provides a better foundation of the natural sciences.

Given the Strawsonian distinction, natural language ontology clearly belongs to descriptive metaphysics, in the sense that its subject matter is the ontology reflected linguistic intuitions regarding the truth conditions or acceptability of natural language sentences.

A distinction somewhat similar to the Strawsonian distinction between descriptive and revisionary metaphysics has recently been made by Fine (2017). Fine distinguishes between what he calls ‘naïve metaphysics’ and ‘foundational metaphysics’. Naïve metaphysics is metaphysics whose subject matter is the ontology reflected in our ordinary judgments. Being defined in terms of what is reflected in judgments, Fine calls it also ‘the metaphysics of appearances’ (a term that is not meant to blur the distinction between actual and merely conceived entities, Section 3.2.). The subject matter of foundational metaphysics, by contrast, is the ontology of what therereally is, namely, for Fine, fundamental reality. Naïve metaphysics coincides with descriptive metaphysics, as understood above. Foundational metaphysics is defined in terms of its subject matter, not in terms of its deviation from naïve metaphysics. What is novel in Fine’s distinction is how the relation between naïve and foundational metaphysics is understood. For Fine, foundational metaphysics must take naïve metaphysics as its starting point: naïve metaphysics cannot be skipped in favor of foundational metaphysics. Foundational metaphysics presupposes the notions that naïve metaphysics deals with and has one of its aims to explain them in more fundamental terms. Naive metaphysics therefore should be pursued without foundational considerations.

Given the Finean distinction, natural language ontology is clearly part of naïve metaphysics. The term ‘naïve metaphysics’ is somewhat misleading, though, when applied to natural language ontology. The ontology implicit in natural language needs to be distinguished from the ontology of what non-philosophers (‘the folk’) naively think there is. The latter is the subject matter of folkmetaphysics. The otology of natural language, by contrast, it is the ontology that competent speakers of the language implicitly accept, whether philosophers or non-philosophers and whether they would naively or not so naively agree with it upon reflection. For that reason, I will stay with the better established and less misleading Strawsonian term ‘descriptive metaphysics’, properly understood.

The view that descriptive metaphysics is to be pursued without foundational considerations also has applications for natural language ontology. The decision whether to posit entities of particular ontological categories as semantic values, say of particular types of referential NPs, should not be made based on assumptions about what is fundamental or what really exists, but rather on the grounds of the semantic behavior of expressions, a guiding principle that actual research in natural language ontology does not always adhere to.

Can natural language be guided by linguistically expressed intuitions alone? Can purely ontological considerations also come into play, or would this mean perhaps mistakenly imposing a sophisticated metaphysics on the ‘folk’ (competent speaker that are non-philosophers)? When addressing that question it is important to distinguish the ontology speakers accept upon naïve reflection from the ontology they implicitly accept when using language (Section 4.). It is not clear that natural language ontology can be pursued, just as a form of ‘metaphysics of appearances’ without foundationalist considerations. Considerations as to what is more fundamental certainly enter considerations as to how to understand derivative entities as semantic values. More importantly, considerations regarding truth play a central role in semantics as well as natural language ontology. The guiding principle for natural language ontology should perhaps better be that of giving priority to linguistic intuitions over foundationalist considerations.

We will see that even among linguistic intuitions distinctions need to be made between legitimate date, from the core of language in a particular sense, and illegitimate ones, from the periphery of language in the relevant sense (Section 5).

**2. 2. How does natural language reflect ontology?**

It is a guiding assumption of natural language ontology that natural language reflects ontology. That is, the semantics of natural languages involves entities of various ontological categories, ontological structures, and ontological notions on the basis of syntactic roles of expressions, syntactic categories and features, and lexical words. Here are some of the specific ways of the involvement of ontology in natural language.

**2.2.1. Entities in different semantic roles**

First of all, entities may play various roles in the semantic structure of natural language sentences, though in what way exactly may depend somewhat on particular semantic theories about relevant constructions or expressions.

**2.2.1.1. Semantic values of referential NPs and domains of quantifiers**

Most importantly, entities play a role as the semantic values of referential noun phrases (NPs) as well as the things that quantificational NPs range over. Entities also play a role as arguments of predicates. Natural language contains a wealth of expressions referring to or quantifying over entities, and it comes with a wealth of expressions that express properties of entities (or relations among them). The standard view is that with the utterance of a simple sentence like *that thing is red, red* expresses a property of entities and that property is attributed to the entity the speaker refers to with *that thing*.

The notion of a referential NP is equally important in linguistics and in philosophy. Referential NPs generally are considered occurrences of NPs in sentences in which they have the function of standing for objects. Proper names and definite NPs can serve as referential NPs, as can specific indefinites and certain determinerless (bare) plurals and mass nouns. Only certain syntactic positions are reserved for referential NPs, such as the subject and the object position of extensional predicates, as opposed to intensional predicates like *need*, intentional predicates like *imagine*, and existence predicates like *exist* and *occur*. There are various syntactic and semantic criteria for referential NPs. For philosophers, since Frege, they include the ability of an NP to support anaphora, to be replaceable by quantificational NPs, and to serve as arguments of ordinary (i.e. extensional) predicates (Frege 1892, Hale 1987). For syntacticians, referential NPs also must satisfy certain syntactic conditions (having the more complex structure of a determiner phrase (DP) rather than just an NP, the category of predicative NPs (Borer 2005).

The notion of a referential NP (or ’name’ as it was called at the time) already plays a central role in Frege’s (1892) philosophy of language and even provides a syntactic criterion for objecthood. For Frege, an object is what can be the semantic value of a referential NP (using the contemporary term). Standing for an object is the contribution of a referential NP in the context of a sentence, and is considered part of Frege’s Context Principle (Wright 1983).

Entities also play a role as semantic values of variables and thus quantifiers. Ontological commitment has been tied to the role of semantic values of variables by Quine, who put forward the dictum ‘to be is to be the value of a variable’. This was meant to apply not so much to natural language, though, but to regimentations of it, in particular in formal theories of science. Yet being the semantic value of whatever may correspond to a variable in natural language has become a well-established criterion for objecthood in the practice of natural language ontology.

Some caution needs to be applied to both the Fregean and the Quinean criterion of objecthood. There are apparently referential NPs whose function is not that of standing for an object, such as that are subjects of existential statements (*Santa Claus does not exist*), and arguments of intentional verbs (*John is thinking about Santa Claus*). There are moreover views according to which referential and quantificational NPs do not always range over objects, but may just have an inferential role (Hofweber 2016). Moreover, not all quantificational NPs have the same semantic role, ranging over entities that will also act as arguments of the embedding predicate. Quantificational NPs of the sort *something, everything*, and *several things* in English, which can take the place of predicative complements as well as other nonreferential positions, have been argued to have a nominalizing function introducing a new entity into the semantic structure of a sentence (Moltmann 2003, 2013) or, as non-nominal quantifiers to range over the same higher-order over entities that are the semantic values of the expressions they may replace (Rosefeld 2008).

The notion of a referential NP also plays a central in the tradition of Montague Grammar, where referential NPs are taken to be of type *e*, the type of entities (Thomason 1970). Montague himself, though, proposed type-lifting referential NPs to the type of individual concept. This allows for semantic uniformity with respect to entities that have been taken to stand for individual concepts, such as *the rising temperature*, *the golden mountain* and *the mathematician John claims to be* (but see Section3.1.1.). This move, however, blurs the distinction between the ontological and the conceptual, with referential NPs no longer being a criterion for what is in the ontology of the language.

**2.2.1.2. Implicit arguments**

Another role entities may play in the semantic structure of sentences is that of implicit arguments, that is, as arguments of predicates without also being the semantic values of a referential NP. For example, on Davidson‘s (1967) influential analysis, the sentence *John walked slowly* states that there is an event which, together with John, is an argument of *walk* and of which *slowly* (now treated as a predicate of events) is true. The very same arguments that lead Davidson to posit events as implicit arguments apply to adjectives and motivate tropes (particularized properties) as arguments of adjectives. *John is profoundly happy* will then state that there is manifestation of happiness (a trope) that, together with John, is an argument of *happy* and of which *profoundly* is true (Moltmann 2009, 2013a). Other implicit arguments proposed in the literature are degrees as arguments of adjectives, implicit location arguments for weather predicates, and implicit taste parameters or judges for predicates of personal taste. Generally, implicit arguments are motivated by observations about expressions (such as adverbials) acting as predicates targeting an entity for which there is no overt noun phrase.

The semantic role of implicit arguments raises the question whether there is a difference in ontological status between entities that are implicit arguments and entities that are semantic values of semantic values of referential NPs. In fact, the two sorts of roles are treated differently in the practice of natural language ontology. Davidson’s arguments for events are generally considered stronger arguments for events being art of natural language than the fact that there are referential NPs denoting events. Referential NPs may belong to the periphery of language, which means their semantic values need not belong to the ontology of language (Section 5). This would not be an option for implicit arguments of predicates that do not belong to the periphery. There is also a difference in ontological commitment. Referential NP, it seems, are able to stand for non-existent entities under particular circumstances (Section 3.2.). But implicit arguments cannot be nonexistent entities.

**2.2.1.3. Parameters of evaluation and truthmakers**

Another important semantic role of entities in the semantic structure of natural language sentences is that of a parameter of evaluation for the truth of sentences. The standard semantic view takes a sentence to be true or false not absolutely, but relative to a time and a (possible) world. This gives first of all justice to the intuition that sentences can be true or false in actual as well as counterfactual circumstances. Moreover, there are natural language expressions that have been considered operators shifting a parameter of evaluation. Tenses and temporal adverbials are standardly taken to act as operators shifting the time of evaluation and modals as operators shifting the world of evaluation. Also conditionals are generally treated as involving a shift in the world of evaluation for antecedent and consequent.

Entities as parameters of evaluation raise an important issue, namely whether there is a difference in ontological commitment between parameters of evaluation on the one hand and semantic values of referential terms and implicit arguments of predicates on the other. A common view is that parameters of evaluation are mere posits in the semantic theory, not involving an ontological commitment on the part of the language user. Only under particular circumstances are parameters of evaluation taken to involve an ontological commitment. One criterion is of course if the object language also offers referential expressions referring to the entities that can act as parameters evaluation. For example, there are generally lots of referential expressions in natural languages referring to times (*today, that day, that moment* etc), but not for worlds, at least not from the core of language (Section 5). Another criterion is whether parameters can be discarded once the parameter is shifted to a new entity. If not, that is, if the re-identification of the entity serving as parameter is required, then there is an ontological commitment to such an entity [SEP Situations]. Frege’s criterion of objecthood of course does not apply to parameters of evaluation, and it did nt even apply to implicit arguments.

**2.2.1.4. Other semantic roles**

Entities play yet other semantic roles, namely within other particular theoretical developments of formal semantics. Situations, in particular have been uses for other semantic roles than that of parameters of evaluation. Thus, in Austin’s (1950) theory of sentence meaning, a speaker, when uttering a sentence, refers to a situation that provides quantifier domains and semantic values of indexical. Does this mean an ontological commitment to situations? Certainly, an ontological commitment to situations is in place if situations form part of the intention of speakers when using a sentence, as is the case on that theory. This is also the case for various uses of situations for the semantic of definite and quantificational NPs, as well as E-type pronouns (Elbourne 2005). Situations play a role strictly outside the meaning of a sentence in Recanati’s (2010) theory of pragmatic enrichment.

In the more recent development of truthmaker semantics (Fine 2017b), situations play somewhat similar roles as worlds of evaluation in their role as parameters of evaluation, though truthmakers are based on a relation of exact truthmaking between situations and sentences. Situations in their role as truth maker appear to also play as semantic values of referential and quantificational NPs, namely those with *case* as head noun (Moltmann 2019), which would amount to an ontological commitment, in both the Fregean and the Quinean sense.

**2.2.2. The connection between ontology and compositionality**

The ontology of natural language is intimately linked to compositionality, the chief tenet of natural language semantics. Whether and how entities play a role in the semantic structure of

natural language depends very much on what the semantic contribution of occurrences of expressions to the composition of the meaning of the sentence is taken to be. Generally, the contribution of referential NPs is taken to be that of standing for an object and the role of expressions acting as predicates to take objects as arguments for the sentence to be true or false. It is a fundamental implicit assumption of natural language semantics that the two assumptions are needed to allow for a uniform account of the contribution of referential NPs and predicates to the truth condition of sentences.

There is also a view according to which the semantic role of expressions reflects ontology. Specifically this view has been held by Frege, for whom predicates stand for concepts, unsaturated entities that need to apply to an object to yield a truth value. This view, however, is not uncontroversial (Liebesman 2015)

**2.2.3. Ontological categories and syntactic categories and positions**

Natural language appears to manifest ontology also in its syntactic categories and syntactic positions, which appear to reflect ontological categories. Thus, verbs are generally taken to reflect the category of events (Szabo 2015). Adjectives generally reflect the category of qualities or tropes (Williams 1953, Woltersdorff 1970, Moltmann 2009). Syntactic categories do not strictly correlate with ontological categories, though. *Be in a hurry*, *be hurried* and *hurry* all are predicates seemingly standing for the same property, but based on the lexical content of a noun, an adjective, and a verb, respectively. Another, mere tendency of a correlation is that of the syntactic mass-count distinction among nouns with the distinction between individuals and stuff (Section 3.6.).

There is no agreement, at this point, as to the ontological content of syntactic category distinctions. Such correlations make a difficult topic also because there is a lot of crosslinguistic variation as to what syntactic categories natural languages display. Moreover, there are theoretical developments in syntax that put familiar syntactic category distinctions into question and require at least a recasting of the issue. For example, in distributive morphology (Halle/Marantz 1993, Borer 2005), lexical words (roots) are not associated with syntactic categories in the lexicon. Only when they are inserted in a syntactic structure will they be associated with syntactic categories, which means they cannot owe any ontologically relevant lexical content to a syntactic category Another example is the theory of radical lexical decomposition (Hale/Keyser 2006), which has proposed, for example, that a range of full verbs are derived from combinations light verb – noun e.g. *walk* from *take a walk* ( *take* is the light verb and *walk* the noun). This view gives up a close connection between events and the category of verbs, but posits a much greater range of nouns instead that underlie full verbs.

Ontological categories may be reflected still in other ways in natural language than in syntactic categories, such as thematic relations and syntactic positions. On the recent cartographic of syntax (Cinque / Rizzi 2010), for example, syntactic positions are generally associated with semantic content, and sometimes with ontological categories, for example different positions for adjectival modifiers nouns for modality and for tense .

**2.2.4. Metaphysically relevant specific expressions and constructions**

Besides syntactic categories, natural language displays particular types of expressions and constructions that appear to convey metaphysical notions. Examples are of course the copula be conveying identity, predication, existence and perhaps other, related notions, modals that convey metaphysical modality (*may, must, essential, the nature of*), existence predicates that convey existence or ways of being (*exist, occur, obtain*) (Fine 2006, Moltmann 2013d), ontological dependence (which may conveyed by *have* or the possessor construction), part-whole-related expressions (*part of, whole, partially, completely*) (Moltmann 1997), verbs and constructions of causation (*make, cause*) (Swanson 2012, Ramchand 2017), and truth predicates and truth-related constructions (Moltmann 2017, 2019, Hinzen 2016). In addition, there are various nominal constructions that serve to denote entities of particular categories, perhaps introduced in particular construction-specific ways. These include nominalizations of various sorts as well as constructions that may introduce entities in virtue of their constructional semantics such as the fact-introducing NPs like *John’s resembling Bill* or *the fact that* John resembles Bill (Vendler1967).

One might be tempted to add sortals and various underived nouns that convey metaphysical notions (*existence, property, being, event, number*). However, there are reasons to consider such nouns part of the periphery, not the core of language in a relevant sense and thus not indicative of the ontology of natural language (Section 5).

**2.2.5. Chomskyan skepticism about reference to objects in the semantics of natural language**

The view that referential NPs stand for objects is not uncontroversial. Most notably, Chomsky’s (1998, 1986, 2013) put forward a range of cases of co-predication putting the traditional notion of reference as a relation to mind-independent, real objects in question. Chomsky’s examples consist in various inconsistent property ascriptions that objects on standard views would not be able to bear. For example, what we refer to as a ‘door’ could be painted, replaced, and walked through, properties that could not be attributed jointly to material objects as standardly understood. Another example is a home, which unlike a house may have peculiar combinations of properties: one can own or sell a home, but not, for example paint a home. Other examples include cites, which can be destroyed and rebuilt at a different location, artifacts, which can undergo complete replacement of their parts, and persons with their relative independence of the bodies. Even terms like *water* do not stand for an external substance, but are individuated in part by their roles in people’s lives. Water, for example, can be polluted, but not so for H20.

Chomsky rejects reference as a relation to objects in a mind-independent reality. The semantics of referential noun phrases involve lexical/conceptual structures deployed by speakers in particular contexts to refer to particular aspects of reality. This view requires a different conception of compositionality, such as one based on concept composition, rather than objects (Pietroski 2018).

Chomsky’s position appears to imply a rejection of natural language ontology, since he denies that speakers using referential NPs refer to objects on any standard understanding. There are different kinds of responses to the Chomskyan challenges that are available. First, one may pursue a different conception of reality. Reality need not be conceived as a mind-independent realm of material objects, subject to particular constraints on spatio-temporal location, but may consist in a plenitude of entities, including entities that are individuated by function and purpose as well as derivative entities that inherit properties from simpler entities in different ways. A second type of response is to revise standard views of predication. One such proposal is to have predicates apply to undererspecified conceptual units (do objects) and only then map them onto real objects (Pustejovski 1995). Another may be to have predicates attribute properties based on inheritance on property inheritance (Liebesman / Magidor 2017).

**3. Distinctive features of the ontology of natural language**

**3.1. Complex NPs and constructional ontology**

The pursuit of natural language ontology appears to go along with a view of ontological pluralism, according to which there is not a single ontology, but several ontologies associated with different cognitive or representational functions, in addition to the ontology of what there ultimately is. The following sections will discuss cases that appear to show a discrepancy between the ontology of natural language and the reflective ontology of ordinary speakers, that is, the ontology speakers naively accept when thinking about what there is, an ontology that includes the ontology of ordinary objects. They are just some of examples of the wealth of ‘derivative’ or ‘minor’ entities that referential NPs may stand for and that are likely to be rejected by speakers of the language when thinking about there is. Referential NPs standing for such controversial entities satisfy the very same criteria of referentiality as NPs standing for less controversial entities, for example, by accepting the same sorts of predicates as ordinary referential NPs, supporting anaphoric pronouns and being replaceable by quantifiers.

**3.1.1. Reference to unrestricted sums and kinds**

The first case is definite plurals and mass nouns as well as conjunctions of definite NPs. The dominant view in natural language semantics is that the semantics of such NPs involves an ontology of unrestricted sums of individuals (in the case of plurals) and of quantities (in the case of mass NPs). That is, the definite plural NP *the stones* *in Joe’s garden* stands for the sum of the stones in Joe’s garden, the definite mass NP *the sand in the Sahara* stands for the sum of the sand quantities in the Sahara, the conjunction the Louvre and the US stands for the sum of the Louvre and the president of the US (Link 1983, Champollion/Krifka 2017, Moltmann 1997). A sum of individuals here is to be understood on the basis of a part relation specific to plurals and distinct from the part relation applying to individuals (Link 1983) or else a nontransitive part relation (Moltmann 1997). Motivations for that view are that plurals and exhibit standard criteria of referentiality and share predicates with singular NPs such as *heavy*, which displays collective readings applying to the entire referent of the definite NP, as in (1b) and (1c):

(1) a. The stone is heavy

b. The stones are heavy.

c. The sand is heavy.

Clearly, if definite plural and mass NPs and conjunctions of definite NPs stand for sums, they do not impose any restrictions on the formation of sums, which means that the ontology of natural language displays exhibit mereological universalism [SEP: Mereology]. By contrast, mereological universalism is generally not taken to obtain for the ontology of ordinary objects, where sum formation appears to be subject to conditions of integrity that the potential sum must fulfill (Simons 1987) or by teleological conditions of purpose (Schaffer / Rosen 2017). Yet such restrictions need not obtain for sum formation in the ontology of the real, where mereological universalism is a plausible view.

A similar discrepancy is displayed by bare (determinerless) plurals and mass nouns such as *donosaurs* or *water.* Bare plurals and mass nouns English are generally taken to be able to act as kind-referring terms, with predicates conveying properties of the kind as a whole, as in (2a) or properties characteristic of the instances of the kind as in (2b) (Carlson 1977):

(2) a. Water is transparent

b. Dinosaurs are extinct.

The referential status of the bare nouns in (2a, b) is supported by the usual criteria for referentiality.  *Water* thus will stand for a kind (substance) whose instances are quantities such as the water in that glass and giraffes will stand for a kind whose instances are individuals such as that giraffe. Similarly, bare adjective nominalizations such as *wisdom* in (3) have been argued to stand for kinds (qualities), namely kinds whose instances are tropes (Moltmann 2004, 2013):

(3) Wisdom is better than cleverness.

Wisdom will have as its instances tropes such as Socrates’ wisdom. With bare plurals and adjective nominalizations, English appears to directly reflect an Aristotelian four-category ontology [SEP Aristotle]: individuals (primary substances) - kinds of individuals (secondary substances), tropes (accidents) – kinds of tropes (qualities). Alike Aristotelian secondary substances, the kinds bare plurals stand for generally inherit their properties of their instances (*Giraffes are tall*) and exist only if instantiated (*Giraffes exists* implies the existence of an individual giraffe).

The semantics of bare plurals and mass nouns involves a particular notion of kind, though. Kind formation for the purpose of the semantics of bare plural and mass nouns would be unrestricted. Bare plurals like *old pink buttons* or *cheap red wine* are kind-referring terms of the same sort as giraffes, displaying the same semantic characteristic readings of predicates. However, those would hardly be considered kinds in folkmetaphysics or the ontology of the real, where not just any instantiated property corresponds to a kind.

However, the view that definite plurals and mass NPs and bare plurals and mass nouns involve reference to entities that are unrestricted sums or kinds is not uncontroversial. An alternative view that has been pursued for definite plurals is that of plural reference, according to which a definite plural the stones refers to each stone at once, rather than referring to a single plurality (Yi 2005, 2006, Oliver/Smiley 2013, Moltmann 2016b) [SEP Pluralquantification]. Plural reference is supported by intuitions that in the object language, the pluralities that definite plurals stand for are never treated as one, but as rather many. For example, the semantic value of *the children* and of *the adults* below could not be counted as single entities (so that John would count two if he counted correctly), only the individual children and adults can:

(4) John counted the children and the adults.

Another argument comes from the reading of the predicate *exist*: *exist* below cannot state the existence of the plurality of children independently of the existence of the individual children, making a claim about the existence of a sums as entity distinct from the individuals making it up (Moltmann 2004):

(5) The children exist.

In that respect, plurals behave differently from collective NPs with which *exist* can state the existence of a sum:

(6) The group / sum of children exists.

Similarly, quantities as denotations of definite mass NPs appear to behave neither as one nor as many and may ultimately require a different formal semantic account (McKay 2016, Laycock 2006).

Similar considerations shed doubt on bare plural and mass nouns referring to kinds as single entities. For example, the analogue of (5) in (7a) cannot possibly used to make a claim about a noninstantiated kind or property, as opposed to (7b), which can be used that way:

(7) a. Wisdom exists.

b. The property of being wise exists.

With bare plurals and mass nouns other predicates likewise cannot be understood so as to apply to the kind as a single entity. Predicates like *encounter, look for, is interesting* only have readings applying to instances of the kind, not the kind itself, unlike terms for property objects. There two alternatives one might pursue for kind terms of the sort of bare plurals and mass nouns. One of them is to distinguish between entities that cannot bear properties themselves but have properties strictly on the basis of inheritance from their instances. Another is to extend plural reference to bare plurals and mass nouns, by taking them to plurally refer to all the possible instances. This would mean that natural language does not actually permit reference to unrestricted kinds, just as it does not permit reference to unrestricted sum.

However, there are other complex NPs whose semantic values are entities that are not likely part of the ontology of speakers accept upon reflection. One example is NPs standing for variable objects, entities that may have different manifestations as ‘ordinary entities’ at different circumstances. Thus, definite NPs such as *the water in the container* (which has been exchanged), *the rising temperature*, *the people that can fit into the car*, or *the book John needs to write* (Fine 1999, Moltmann 2013, 2020).

**3.1.2. Introduction of objects by abstraction**

An important way of introducing objects on the basis of others that has been discussed in the philosophical literature is by abstraction (Frege 1884, Wright 1983, Hale 1987) or as pleonastic entities (Schiffer 2003). This raises the question whether the strategy of introducing objects is part of the semantics of natural language expressions. On the Fregean view, it applies to number terms like *the number of planets*, on another view, it applies to a range of nominalizations, *that-*clauses, expressions like *the property of being wise* (Schiffer 2013); on third view it is strictly associated with the compositional semantics of close appositions of the sort *the number eight* and *the truthvalue true*, as well as other ‘reifying terms’ of the sort *the property of being wise* and *the fact that* S. Distinction between Davidsonian and Kimean events (Maienborn 2017)

**3.2. Intentional (‘nonexistent’) objects**

The requirement of a compositional semantics also bears on the issue where there should be nonexistent objects or what I will also call ‘(merely) intentional objects’ as part of the ontology of natural language. The view that there are nonexistent objects, Meinongianism, is a highly controversial philosophical view (Inwagen 2001). But it is a view that is often motivated or defended by appeal to sentences in natural language (Parsons 1980, Salmon 1987, 1998, Fine 1982a, Moltmann 2013a, 2016). The Meinongian view is generally discussed with simple sentences involving *exist* or intentional transitive verbs such as *look for* or *think about*:

(8) a. Pegasus does not exist.

b. John thought about / was looking for Pegasus.

It has often been proposed that the occurrence of *Pegasus* in (8a) and (8b) is in fact not a referential occurrence, but an exceptional, empty occurrence of a name. However, *Pegasus* in (8a) and (8b) appears to fulfil the criteria for referential terms (supporting anaphora, allowing for replacement by quantifiers). There are even stronger arguments from compositionality for NPs in the subject position of exist and the object position of *think* standing for a (non-existent) object, and that comes from constructions with relative clauses as below:

(9) a. The building John though about does not exist.

b. John thought about a building that does not exist.

A compositional semantics of the relative clause constructions in () can hardly be achieved without positing intentional objects as arguments of *think about* as well as *exist*. Yet, intentional objects must be restricted to the argument positions of those verbs, since they could not contribute to the truth of sentences of sentences in other argument positions (including as implicit arguments), which, it has been argued, generally are existence-entailing (Priest 2005, Moltmann 2016). Given the proper methodological order of natural language ontology, the subsequent task then is to develop a theory of nonexistent objects that is both coherent and gives justice to their restricted occurrences in the semantic structure of sentences, perhaps as derivative objects obtained from coordinated (pretend or failed) referential acts, which would be described by intentional verbs (Moltmann 2016).

One might think that given the approach of descriptive metaphysics (or the ‘metaphysics of appearance’, possibly non-existent objects would always have to be posited as semantic values of referential NPs in general: referential NPs reflect entities of a certain sort whether or not they exist. Given the approach of descriptive metaphysics one might think that nonexistent object have to always be posited, as they are part of the ‘ontology of appearances’ reflected in natural language. However, semantic values need to contribute to truth conditions, and referential NPs that turn out not to refer fail to have a semantic value rather than standing for a nonexistent object. Thus nonexistent objects in that sense are not objects a speaker aims to refer to or quantify over but that may turn out not to exist, but rather objects which the speaker herself takes to be nonexistent. But this cannot be right. Only actual entities as semantic values can contribute to truth conditions when they are arguments of ordinary (argument positions of) predicates. Thus nonexistent objects should not serve as semantic values in those cases. They do serve as semantic values of intentional predicates, but also in intensional contexts, when referential NPs are in the scope of expressions serving as intensional operators. Examples are contexts in the scope of a modifier like *according to the story* or *according to Marco Polo* or clauses embedded under nonfactive attitude verbs or verbs of saying (*think, believe say, claim*).

Intentional objects have also played a role across sentence boundaries in embedded contexts, both within an intensional context of a single agent and across intensional contexts involving different agents (Edelberg 1986). In those contexts, they also figure as discourse referents and interact with dynamic semantics. As such they are individuated both just by what properties agents attribute to them, but also by the flow of information I the discourse. The discourse referents posited in dynamic semantics in general as semantic values of unbound anaphoric pronouns have sometimes been conceived ontologically (Landman 1986), though dominant view in dynamic semantics is to take them to be mere representations variables in a discourse representation structure or formal semantic constructions.

**3.3. The mass-count distinction**

The mass-count distinction bears, it seems, on a central topic in ontology, the notion of being a single object and being countable. It also appears to display in a particularly striking way a discrepancy between the ontology displayed by natural language and the ontology tied to cognition or the ontology of the real. The research about the mass count distinction and related issues, such as classifier languages across languages has become enormous and only a few general remarks can be made about the mass-count distinction in English and similar languages.

The mass-count distinction is a morpho-syntactic distinction among nouns in English and a range of other languages that is generally taken to have semantic content. Various sorts of criteria distinguish count nouns from mass nouns, such as exhibiting the singular-plural distinction, accepting ordinal and cardinal numerals (two, second), as well as quantifiers like many and few as opposed to much and little. At first sight, the mass-count distinction seem to semantically match the ontological distinction between objects (*chair, door*) and matter or stuff (*metal, wood*), which also appears particularly well-reflected in the meaning shift that generally occurs when a count noun is turned into a mass noun (*many apples* 🡪 *much apple*). The distinction might then be drawn between nouns holding of entities that have a boundary or some other form of integrity (or are atoms with respect to the noun in question) and entities that fail to have a boundary or integrity (or that are not atoms with respect to that noun). Such an ontological distinction is, if not a distinction in reality, certainly a distinction in our cognitive ontology or folkmetaphysics. However, linguists have established a number of generalizations that indicate that the distinction between singular count, mass, and plural nouns does not strictly go along with an ontological distinction among different sorts of entities (Chierchia 1998b, Rothstein 2017, Moltmann 1997, 2020b). First, a singular count NP may, it seems, refer to the very same thing as a definite plural or mass NPs (*the (loose) collection of stuff on this desk – the stuff on this desk, the quantity of liquid in the container – the liquid in the container*). Second, languages may make a choice of mass as opposed to count without there being grounds for a perceptual difference (*rice – oats*, *corn – peas*, *cattle – horses*). Moreover, the choice of mass vs count for particular entities appears to an extent arbitrary across languages (Engl.  *hair* - Italian *cappelli*, English *pasta* – French *pâtes*). Third, there is a great range of so-called object mass nouns, mass nouns that appear to stand for pluralities of well-individuated objects, such as *hardware, jewelry, luggage, staff*, *police force*. Object mass nouns often come with apparent co-extensional plural nouns in the same language (*clothes – clothing, policemen – police force, cows – cattle, carpets – carpeting*). Yet like other mass nouns, they resist numerals (\* *the three police force*) as well as a range of other predicates applicable to plurals (*John listed the clothes* / ??? *the clothes*, *John cannot distinguish the policemen* / ?? *the police force*, John compared / the carpets / ??? the carpeting).

Whether a language chooses a singular count, plural, or a mass noun thus appears to an extent arbitrary given the presence of a boundary or integrity based on perception. Natural language thus displays a discrepancy between a notion of unity based on the use of singular count nouns and the notion of unity that pertains to our cognitive ontology. This has given rise to semantic approaches to the semantics of the mass-count distinction that explicitly recognize a level of ‘grammaticized individuation’ (Rothstein 2017) or language-driven ontology (Moltmann 2020b) as distinct from the ontology that pertains to cognition or to reality. Yet, the cognitive ontology of ordinary still plays a role in the semantics of natural language as well, for example in the choice of ‘classifiers’ for mass nouns standing for different sorts of entities (*piece of furniture, head of cattle, glass of wine*).

**4. Characterizing the ontology of natural language**

The project of natural language ontology goes hand in hand with a view of ontological pluralism, the view according to which there is not a single ontology, but several ontologies, at least potentially distinct ontologies pertaining to language, to cognition, and to fundamental reality. How then should the ontology of natural language be characterized and distinguished from other ontologies?

First of all, it should be distinguished with respect to the cognitive dimension it relates to, language, as opposed to perception and cognition in general. The following condition then is a first proposal of how to characterize the ontology of natural language:

(10) Characterization of the ontology of natural language (1st version)

The ontology of a natural language is the ontology a speaker accepts *by way of using the*

*language.*

The by-way-of-condition ensures that the ontology of natural language is not an ontology the speaker just accepts when using language, which could be the case just by coincidence.

The other dimension in which the ontology of natural language needs to be characterized is in terms of the opposition intuition [SEP] – reflection / reasoning. The ontology of natural language is to be distinguished from the ontology a philosopher or non-philosopher accepts upon reflection, that is, on the basis of ontological reasoning. An ontological view that a philosophy (or non-philosopher) arrives at upon reflection can obviously expressed and conveyed to others making use of natural language. Natural language can be used for making and denying various ontological claims and for introducing revisionary ontological theories. However, such uses of natural language do not display the ontology implicit in natural language. The ontology implicit in natural language thus must be distinguished from ontological views that are based on reasoning and that can be put forward or denied using natural language.

What are the criteria for the distinction between the ontology implicit in language and an ontology based on reasoning? In what sorts of linguistic data does it manifest itself? As a first important criterion, metaphysical assertions cannot be indicative of the ontology implicit in natural language. In that respect, natural language ontology differs both from the use of language for the purpose of conveying philosophical reflection and from folkmetaphysics, the naïve ontology that non-philosophers (‘the folk’) subscribe to. Folkmetaphysics, just like folkphysics and folkbiology, can manifest itself in metaphysical assertions. Thus, the assertions below may belong to the data of folkmetaphysics (as well as being potential expressions of a particular philosopher’s view):

(11) a. There are artifacts.

b. Objects are not events.

c. There are things.

The assertive content of such sentences is not indicative of the ontology of natural language.

No philosopher or linguist would appeal to assertions as in (8) when arguing that natural language reflects an ontology of artifacts or objects distinct from events, or of entities as such. Otherwise, another philosopher or linguists might just as well appeal to denials of (8a, b, c) to argue for just the opposite. What matters for natural language ontology are ontological presuppositions, not assertions.

How do ontological presuppositions manifest themselves in language? One rather familiar way is as pesuppositions of ontological categories carried by predicates, referential NPs, quantifiers, or pronouns. Thus, predicates may require as arguments entities of particular ontological categories on pain of resulting in a category mistake (Magidor 2013). For example, *stop* and *happen* require events as arguments, and *move* and *exist* (enduring) objects. There are also constraints on the sorts of entities particular sorts of NPs may stand for. For example, gerunds like *John’s buying of the house* can only stand for events, gerunds like *John’s buying the house* only for facts (Vendler 1967). Quantificational NPs like *every time* can range only over times or situations, quantifiers like *somewhere* only over places, and quantifiers like *somehow* only over qualities. Similarly, the pronoun *when* can only stand for a time, the pronoun *where* for a location, and the pronoun *how* for a quality. Ontological categories may also be associated with syntactic categories (Section 2.2.3.).

There are also linguistic data that only natural language ontology will take into account, but not folkmetaphysics or any form of philosophical reflection. These include sentences that involve ontological commitments not accessible to ordinary speakers, for example, by containing silent syntactic elements with ontological content, as would be the case according to the sorts of syntactic structures posited in generative syntax. For example, Kayne argues that the sentence involves a silent occurrence of , which means the sentence involves a commitment to. Another example is lexical decomposition in syntax with ontological relevance. Thus, Harves/Kayne (2012) argue that the English verb *need* is underlyingly *have need*. If this structure is input to interpretation, it means that it involves an ontological commitment to things like needs that is not evident from the simple verb *need* alone (Moltmann 2019). Underlying syntactic structures of this sort are generally unavailable for reasoning by speakers of the language. They are posited in generative linguistics on the background assumption that knowledge of grammar is implicit and to an extent innate, and as such not available to introspection and reflection. Given the generative view, ontological notions involved in such structures should be just as much part of implicit knowledge unavailable to introspection as the syntactic structures themselves.

The ontology of natural language thus must be understood as an ontology that speakers *implicitly accept*, not as an ontology speakers accept upon reflection when thinking about what there is and about the nature of things:

(12) Characterization of the ontology implicit in natural language (2st version)

The ontology of a natural language is the ontology speakers implicitly accept by way of

using the language.

The notion of implicit acceptance of the ontology is a particularly robust one in that it resists rejection upon reflection, at least as long as the agent uses the same language. Ordinary speakers may reject entities or any notions in the ontology that is implicit in natural language displays and maintain a revisionary ontological view instead. Yet anyone that uses the relevant parts of the language commits herself to them. The form of implicit acceptance is rather different from the notion of implicit acceptance in ethics. In the context of ethics, what is implicitly accepted, *implicit bias* [SEP], permits rejection upon reflection. The ontology implicit in natural language is in that respect on a par with syntax: even awareness of grammatical structure generally does not permit changing or ‘improving’ it, at least as long as it pertains to the core of language.

**5. Natural language ontology and the core-periphery distinction**

(12) requires a further modification, namely by making reference to a distinction between an ontologically relevant core and ontologically relevant core periphery of natural language. Natural language ontology should set aside not only metaphysical assertions, but also a second range of linguistic data, namely those involving technical philosophical expressions or special, philosophical or ‘technical’ uses of expressions. Philosophers or non-philosophers when engaging in ontological reflection may use or introduce expressions specifically meant to convey ontological notions based on reflection. But of course, such technical philosophical expressions or uses of expressions are not indicative of the ontology that is implicitly accepted by the use of language, but rather of an ontology based on reasoning or reflection. Non-ordinary uses of natural language expressions were the subject of critique in ordinary language philosophy since they appear to generate philosophical problems. Whether or not one agrees with the latter, certainly non-ordinary uses of ontologically relevant expressions need not reflect the ontology implicit in language. That does not means such uses should be sanctioned. Rather a distinction that needs to be made between the (ontological) *core* of natural language (or the use of it) and its (ontological) *periphery.* Only the core reflects the ontology of natural language of language, not the periphery.

In fact, such a core-periphery distinction has been made implicitly throughout the history of philosophy. Philosophers that appealed to natural language for motivating a particular ontological view have always made use of only certain types of expressions or uses of expressions and not others, implicitly drawing the distinction between ontology based on implicit acceptance, and ontology based on reasoning. The same holds for the practice of contemporary semanticists and philosophers pursuing natural language ontology. This core-periphery distinction is essential for natural language ontology. Otherwise, any ontological view or notion, as reflected in particular technical terms or uses of them, would be part of the ontology of natural language, which is clearly not the case.

What sorts of expressions or uses of expressions are part of the periphery? Apart of technical terms introduced as such, one kind of expression that certainly belongs to the periphery is reifying NPs of the sort *the number eight, the property of being happy, the proposition that it is raining*, or *the truth value true*. Philosophers have generally stayed away from reifying NPs when appealing to natural language for motivating an ontological category. For example, Frege (1884) did not motivate numbers as objects by appealing to the construction *the number eight* in natural language, and he did not motivate truth values as objects by appealing to *the truth value true*. Rather he used expressions like *the number of planets* and *eight*, which certainly belong to the core of language, when arguing for numbers being objects, and his motivations for considering truth values objects did not come from particular natural language sentences at all. Likewise, Hale (1987) did not argue for properties being objects on the basis of terms like *the property of mercy*. Rather he used simple terms like *mercy* from the core of language. Finally, Link (1983) did not motivate mereological sums being part of the ontology of language on the basis of terms like *the sum of the students*, which belong to the periphery of language, but simple definite plurals like *the students*, which clearly belong to the core of language.

Given such a core-periphery distinction, the characterization of the ontology implicit in natural language needs to be revised as follows:

(13) Characterization of the ontology of a natural language (final version)

The ontology of a natural language is the ontology a speaker *implicitly accepts* by way of

making use of the *core* of the language.

(13) gives the characterization of the ontology of a particular language, rather of natural language in general. In the practice of natural language ontology, at least in philosophy, is generally based on an implicit assumption of a single ontology shared by all human languages. This assumption is of course not unproblematic, touching upon the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and the controversy surrounding it (Pinker 1982, Hespos / Spelke 2004, Pelletier 2011).

The core-periphery distinction raises a number of general questions. One of them is whether there are linguistic criteria for the distinction, that is, syntactic or lexical conditions that determine which expressions (or uses of expressions) will be part of the periphery rather than the core. These criteria may involve the distinction between lexical and functional part of language, different syntactic categories (nouns generally seem to permit a non-ordinary use). It also raises the question how the distinction relates to the core-periphery distinction that Chomsky (1981, 2006) introduced for syntax, where, very roughly, the core of the syntactic system of a language represents universal grammar and the periphery consists in exceptions and parts of language added on from outside influences (see also Yang 2016).

The core-periphery distinction in natural language ontology is important also for the quest for universals of natural language ontology. Clearly, only the core, not the periphery can represent a form of universal cognitive language-related ontology. The existing work in natural language ontology certainly incorporates an implicit restriction to the core of language for generalizations meant to be universal. Explicitly the core-periphery distinction is used in the general hypothesis about reference to abstract objects in natural language in Moltmann (2013a):

(14) The Abstract-Objects Hypothesis

Natural language does not involve reference to abstract objects in its core, but only in its

periphery.

Given (14), what appeared to be expressions in the core of natural language, referring to abstract objects (numbers, properties, propositions, degrees, expression types) are in fact expressions referring to particulars, pluralities of (actual or possible) particulars, or variable objects, or expressions that fail to have a referential function in the first place (numerals, clausal complements, predicative complements, complements of intensional transitive verbs). The particulars include tropes (SEP) (particularized properties or accidents), which in turn include quantitative tropes such as John’s height or the number of planets (a number trope). Only in the periphery is reference to abstract objects possible, for example through the use of reifying terms such as *the number eight*, *the property of being happy* or *the proposition that it is raining.*

The periphery presents specific challenges for natural language semantics and natural language ontology. The periphery , from a linguistic point of view, at least, is a legitimate part of natural language or a legitimate extension of it. Still, philosophical terms and non-ordinary, philosophical uses of expressions are part of the legitimate use of natural language. They certainly have a semantics and may reflect an ontology, but they do not reflect the ontology implicit in natural language, but rather an ontology that may diverge from the ontology of the core. It certainly is the task of semantics and natural language ontology to allow for an account of the ontology and hence compositional semantics of the periphery as well. For that purpose it is important to keep in mind that natural language ontology permits merely conceived entities as semantic values in intensional contexts, namely those setting out that the relevant philosophers’ point of view.

Why do reifying NPs such as *the property of being happy* have a peripherical status, but not *happiness*? This may be attributed to the occurrence of the sortal *property* in that construction, rather than the construction as such. Thus, according to Yang (2015), who more recently revived and defended the core-periphery distinction in syntax, functional categories (syntactic categories and features) belong to the syntactic core, but the lexicon to the periphery. Further support for that may be the inability of a functional elements to allow for non-ordinary uses (e.g. (overt or empty) determiners, morpho-syntactic categories (plural, tense)) or syntactic constructions, as opposed to lexical worlds.

**6. Outlook**

Natural language ontology, one can say, is just at the initial stage of a developing discipline of its own. The methodological issues surrounding it remain to a great to be developed much further, such as the relation of the ontology reflected in language to conceptions of reality, to ontologies tied to other representational or cognitive functions, the core-periphery distinction relevant for natural language ontology and possibly its relation to that in syntax, the ontological status associated with different semantic roles, the way ontological categories are reflected in natural language given recent theoretical syntactic and crosslinguistic research.

It is undisputable that there is an ever expanding empirical field of deeper research on the reflection of ontology in a particular language as well as across languages, as well as the relation of the ontology reflected in natural language to cognition. Given the intimate connection of ontology to syntactic notions (syntactic categories and features, syntactic positions, light verbs and nouns), there appear to be the same motivations for the quest for universals as for syntax, at least given a generative perspective.

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