*Logic and Metaphysics Workshop*

November 11, 2024

**On the Ontology and Semantics of Absence**

Friederike Moltmann

CNRS Université Côte d’Azur

[fmoltmann@unice.fr](mailto:fmoltmann@unice.fr)

**Aims and overall view of the talk**

Goals

The semantics of completion-related verbs of absence – English *lack* and *be missing*

* Are modal verbs of weak necessity relating to the completion of a whole
* Involve the notion of completion with respect to a notion of conceptual whole

Conceptual wholes:

* Generate variable objects
* Generate ‘lacks’, modal objects of weak necessity of completion-related absence
* *Be missing* contrasts with *lack* in the way of count vs. mass: *be missing* allows completing entities may be variable parts generated by parts of conceptual wholes.

Overall view

(1) Notion of part structure: the whole determines the parts, for structured entities.

* Structured wholes make both variable objects and variable parts available in semantics.
* Structured wholes allow for incomplete manifestations yielding a notion of incompletion as weak necessity

(2) Modality

* localized notion of modality: modality based on particular conditions involving particular entities
* modal truths based on modal objects and their satisfaction / truthmaking conditions

Plan of the talk

1. Distinguish notion of completion-related absence from other notions of absence in ontology

2. Some observations about the notions of part-whole structure and completion as reflected in natural language

3. Semantics for intensional transitive *lack* and the associated modal *should*

4. Semantics of *be missing* and quantification over variable parts

5. Some observations about transitive *miss*

6. Some observations about *replace*

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

**1. Notions of absence**

**1.1. Absence vs. presence**

Absence as the negation of presence:

(1) a. John is absent

b. John is not present.

Absence as a ‘negative event’, as a truthmaker of negated sentences

(2) a. There is nothing that makes *It is not raining* true.

b. The absence of rain makes *It is not raining* true.

‘Absence of rain’ as an entity, a reified absence (Kukso 2004)

**1.2. Parts that consist in the absence of constituting material**

Holes, openings, empty spaces of art works

**1.3. Completion-related absence**

Absence of something that should be there in order for something else to be complete.

Completion-related verbs of absence in many languages

English: *lack, be missing*, German: *mangeln, fehlen*, French: *manquer*, Italian: *mancare*

What sorts of things can be complete

A simple notion of an integrated whole: maximally self-connectedness entity (R-integrated whole) (Simons 1987)

(3) Definition of an R-integrated whole

For a symmetric, reflexive relation R, for the transitive closure Rtrans of R:

X is an R-integrated whole if for any y, y <x, z, z < x, y Rtrans z, and for no y, y < x, z,

¬z < x, y Rtrans z.

FF-integrated whole: xFFy iff Fy and Fy.

Some linguistic applications of R(FF)-integrated wholes

The readings of part-related predicates *compare* and *distinguish* (Moltmann 1997)

(4) a. John cannot distinguish the pens and the pencils.

b. Mary compared the red wine and the white wine.

Fact

Integrated wholes need not be objects:

pluralities (as many) can be integrated wholes, quantities (stuff) can be integrated wholes.

------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

**2. Some observations about the notions of part-whole and completion**

**2.1. The transitivity of the part relation depends on the nature of the whole**

(5) The page is part of the book

The book is part of the library.

The page is part of the library.

But transitivity depends on the nature of the whole:

(6) The page is part of the book.

The book is part of Kant’s written work.

The page is part of Kant’s written work.

*Written work* as mass nominal allows for transitivity, within limits: not for inferences with ‘the empty pages of the book’, ‘the margins of the page’, etc.

Another example:

(7) The arm is part of the body.

The hand is part of the arm.

The hand is part of the body.

Ways of dismissing problems for transitivity

1) dismiss functional parts as the only parts

2) distinguish different part relations, for different ontological ‘levels’

A different perspective

Parts depend on the nature of the whole: its structure, functional organization etc.

**2.2. The role of wholes for completion**

Completion-related expressions: *partial(ly), complete(ly)*

Two kinds of completion:

1) Full matching of a concrete whole (original)

(8) a. partial copy of the paper

b. a complete copy of the paper.

(9) a. partial reconstruction of the church

b. complete reconstruction of the church.

2) Full manifestation of a conceived whole (type)

(10) a. partial realization of the plan

b. complete realization of the plan

(11) a. John partly forgot the poem.

b. John completely forgot the poem.

Completion of a whole and absence of a part

*Complete* vs. *is missing* NP

Relative to an original:

(12) a. The quotation is complete.

b. The quotation is missing a few words.

Relative to an actual or conceived whole:

(13) a. The collection is complete.

b. After the break-in, the collection is missing a piece.

(14) a. The house is complete.

b. The house is only missing the windows.

Reference to different types of wholes:

Two words for ‘complete’ in German:

*voellig* (whole is homogeneous) and *vollstaendig* (whole comes with discrete units)

(15) a. die vollstaendige Uebersetzung

‘the complete translation‘

b. ??? die voellige Ubersetzung

(16) a. die voellige Dunkelheit

‘the complete darkness‘

b. ??? die vollstaendige Dunkelheit

Conclusion

* Natural language displays a range of part-whole-related expressions involving not just a part of-relation, but also reference to concrete or conceived wholes and different structures of a whole.
* The nature of the whole determines the parts.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

**3. The semantics of *lack***

**3.1. *Lack* as an intensional transitive verb**

Completion-related verbs of absence are intensional transitive verbs:

Unspecific reading of the complement, not permitting existential quantification:

(17) a. The door lacks a key.

b. There is a key x, the door lacks x.

But *lack* is not a proposition-embedding intensional verb:

(18) \* The door lacks having a key.

**3.2. The notion of absence conveyed by *lack***

*Lack* does not just mean ‘not present’

*lack*  = *not have*?

(19) a. The door has a key.

b. The door lacks a key.

(20) a. The cat has a tail.

b. The cat lacks a tail.

(21) a. The picture has a frame.

b. The picture lacks a frame.

But lack does not just mean ‘not have’.

*Lack* presupposes incompleteness, unlike *have:*

(22) a. Mary has a ponytail.

b. ?? Mary lacks a ponytail.

(23) a. The house has a balcony.

b. ?? The house lacks a balcony.

(24) a. John has a daughter.

b. ??? John lacks a daughter.

(25) a. John has a painting by Picasso

b. ??? Bill lacks a painting by Picasso.

Unlike have, *lack* is a modal notion, involving a weak form of necessity:

When acceptable, (22b) entails (26a), (23b) entails (26b), (24b) entails (26c), (25b) entails (26d), on some reading of s*hould*:

(26) a. Mary should have a ponytail.

b. The house should have a balcony.

c. John should have a daughter.

d. Bill should have a Picasso.

Application condition for *lack*

*Lack* relates to a conceptual whole and conveys that that conceptual whole is not fully manifested or realized.

The conceptual whole *lack* relates to need not have objects as its realizations:

May involve individuals with their relations of possession, kinship, friendship:

(27) a. John lacks a car.

b. John lacks a father.

c. Mary lacks a close friend.

The conceptual whole may involve a plurality as many (Oliver / Smiley 2013)

(28) The student protesters lack a leader.

Location-related *lack*: the conceptual whole pertains to a location

(29) a. There is a lack of water.

b. There is water.

Generalization

*Lack* involves the notion of an integrated wholes that is itself not tied to single objecthood.

The notion of an integrated whole is independent of the notion of a single object anyway.

**3.3. Quality-related *lack***

*Have* and *lack* can relate an individual to a quality:

(30) a. Joe has wisdom.

b. Joe lacks wisdom.

(31) a. Mary has talent.

b. Mary lacks talent.

(32) a. Mary’s lack of understanding was astonishing.

b. Mary’s lack of attention to details ruined the project.

Particularized qualities (tropes) are not really ‘parts’ of objects.

Parts of material objects: spatial parts

Parts of events: temporal parts

But qualities may be parts of conceived wholes, and tropes may manifest those qualities.

Abstract objects may have other part structures than concrete objects, and their manifestations…

**3.4. The semantics of *lack***

Alternation between simple and complex predicates

(33) a. John has a lack of understanding.

b. John lacks understanding.

Same alternation with the modal verb *need*:

(34) a. John needs to have a car.

b. John has a need for a car. (Harves/Kayne 2012)

c. ∃d(HAVE(d, John) & [*John to have a car*](d))

(34c) is the analysis of (34a, b) within object-based truthmaker semantics (Moltmann 2008, forthcoming): quantification over modal objects, as made explicit by the complex predicate.

Modal objects

* arise in different, can be produced (permissions) or generated by particular conditions (teleogical modal objects)
* come with satisfaction conditions, best formulated in terms of truthmaker semantics

But can lacks even be entities?

Chomsky on *lacks* and *flaws*:

If I say ‘the flaw in the argument is obvious, but it escaped John’s attention’, I am not committed to the absurd view that among the things in the world are flaws, one of them in the argument in question. Nonetheless, the NP ‘the flaw in the argument’ behaves in all respects in the manner of truly referential expressions like ‘the coat in the closet’ – for example, it can be the antecedent of *it* and serves as an argument, taking a theta-role. Suppose now that we make a rather conventional move, and assume that one step in the interpretation of LF is to posit a domain D of individuals that serve as values of variables and as denotata. Among these individuals are specific flaws (…), John’s lack of talent, and so on.’ (Chomsky *Lectures on Government and Binding*, 1982, p. 324).

The domain D: for Chomsky just another level of syntax…

The present approach

Take lacks seriously ontologically.

Lacks are like needs:

Entities that come with satisfaction conditions, and that disappear once satisfied.

(35) a. John lacks understanding.

b. ∃d(have(John, d) & lack(d) & [*of understanding*](d))

(36) a. John should have understanding.

b. ∃d(should(d) & [*John have understanding*](d))

The satisfaction conditions of a *lack*

(37) a. the house’s lack of a door.

b. For a conceptual whole *C* such that the house is an incomplete actual manifestation of

*C*, the house’s lack *d* of a door, based on *C*, is satisfied iff

for any possible entity *y* such that for the actual (partial) manifestation *x* of C, the

composition of *x* and *y* is a complete manifestation of *C*: there is an entity *z*, door(*z*)

such that *z* is part of *y*.

Involvement of variable embodiments (variable objects) (Fine 1999, 2020)

Variable embodiments are entities associated with a ‘form’ function f from times (and worlds/situations) to manifestations.

Allow manifestations to be (somewhat) incomplete.

(38) The generation of lacks from incomplete manifestations of variable wholes

Suppose for a conceptual whole *C* and a variable object d associated with a function fC,

such that for the present time *t* and actual world *w*, the entity *a*, *a* = *fC*(*d, t, w*), is

incomplete with respect to *C*. Then there is a lack *e* at *t* in w such that an entity *b*

satisfies *e* just in case *a* ⊗ *b* is a complete manifestation of *C*, where ⊗ is a suitable

structure-preserving composition function.

(39) The semantics of a *lack* *of an N*

For a conceptual whole *C*, a variable object *d* associated with the manifestation function

*fC* and a modal object *e*, a time *t* and world *w* such that *fC*(*d, t, w*) is an

incomplete realization of *C*,

[*lack of an* N]*t, w*(e, C) iff lack(e) and for any *x* in an (accessible) world *w’*, if *x* satisfies

*e*, then there is a *y*, [N]*t,w’* (*y*) such that *y* < *x*.

Accounting for the weak necessity inference:

(40) The house should have a door.

Map the houses’ lack *e* of a door satisfiable by a door *x* onto a lack *e’* satisfiable by situations *s* in which the house has *x*.

(41) a. ∃e(HAVE(e, house) & [*of a door*](e))

b. ∃e’(should(e’) & [*the house have a door*](e’))

------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

**3. The predicate of absence *be missing***

**3.1. The semantic peculiarities of be missing**

*Be missing* seems to share uses with *lack*.

(42) a. A leg is missing from the chair.

b. The chair lacks a leg.

(43) a. A door is missing from the hut.

b. The hut lacks a door.

Semantic differences

1) *Be missing* involves a restriction to structural parts, but not so *lack*.

2) The subject of a *lack-*sentence explicitly refers to an entity said to be incomplete; *be missing* involves implicit reference to a conceptual whole that is said to be incomplete (Zimmermann 2014).

Ad 1):

Unlike *lack*, *be missing* is not generally possible with qualities:

(44) a. The candidate lacks talent.

b. ??? Talent is missing (from the candidate).

(45) a. The description lacks a deeper understanding of the situation.

b. ??? A deeper understanding is missing from the description.

*Be missing* dislikes mass NPs, in contrast to *lack*:

(46) a. The well lacks water.

b. ??? Water is missing from the well.

(47) a. The dish lacks salt.

b. Salt is missing from the dish. (is acceptable only if salt was part of the recipe)

*Lack* and *be missing* display the mass-count distinction

The subject argument of *is missing* is restricted to structural or functional parts with respect to a structured whole, but not so the object argument of *lack*.

A related observation

The subject of *be missing*-sentences may quantify ‘individual objects’ restricted by the completion (Zimmermann 2014, Saebo 2014):

(48) a. Three screws are missing (from the IKEA set).

b. Three stamps are still missing (from John’s almost complete stamp collection).

(48a) can mean that three screws of a particular kind meant to be in the IKEA self-assembly package were not there (and perhaps do not even exist).

(48b) can mean that particular kinds of stamps meant to complete the collection were not yet there (and perhaps do not even exist).

What does this mean?

Saebo (2024)

The subject of *be missing*-sentences permits quantification over individual concepts individuated pragmatically.

Simpler alternative

The subject of *be missing*-sentences permits quantification over variable parts generated by parts of the conceptual whole.

Further observation (Saebo 2024)

The same quantifier may range over actual and variable parts (‘individual concepts’) of the whole.

(49) Several things are missing from the collection: the stamp Bill had stolen and the two

stamps any such collection should contain.

Variable objects are of the very same type as particular object (of type *e*), thus quantifiers may range over variable objects and particular manifestations (or rather rigid embodiments), i.e. variable and rigid parts.

**3.2. The semantics of *be missing*: quantification over variable parts**

*Be missing* as a four-place predicate holding of a lack, a conceptual whole C, a variable object generated by C and a variable part generated by a sufficiently small part of C

(50) Semantics of *be missing*

For a time *t* and world *w*, a conceptual whole C and a variable object *d* associated with

the manifestation function *fC* and such that *fC*(*d, t, w*) is an incomplete realization of *C*,

and a variable object *d’* associated with the manifestation function *fC’*, for a small part *C’*

of *C*, for a lack *e*,

[*be missing*]t,w(*e, C, d, d’*) iff *e* pertains to *d* and for any *x* in an (accessible) world *w’*, if

*x* satisfies *e*, then [*d’*]*t’,w’*  < *x*.

Conclusion

The semantics of *be missing* involves not only conceptual wholes, but also conceptual completing parts (variable parts).

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

**4. The transitive verb *miss***

Transitive *miss* describes an objectual attitude of longing for an object:

(51) John misses his brother.

Same reading with ‘miss’ with French *manquer*, Italian, *mancare*, German *fehlen*

Transitive *miss* relates an existing object or an object that existed in the past;

describes a mental state whose satisfaction requires closeness (in physical space or interaction) with the missed object.

Satisfied mental state

constitutes a form of completeness: relevant relations to the object in question

Unsatisfied mental state

those relations are not in place.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

**5. Predicates of replacement**

Predicates of replacement are semantically related to the predicate *be missing*.

Replacement can apply only to well-delimited, often functional parts

(52) Mary replaced the wheel / the table top / the screw.

*Replace* cannot apply to qualities, surfaces, appearances of objects:

(53) ??? Mary replaced the color / the texture / the weight / the surface / the appearance of

the object.

Quantities can be replaced only when they are described as well-delimited:

(54) a. John replaced the water in the container.

b. ??? John replaced a bit of water in the container.

Replacement means taking away a structural / functional part and putting a similar or equivalent object in its place.

Interesting observation

*Replace* can even apply to structural / functional parts described as absent:

(55) John replaced the missing screw.

A proposal:

*The missing screw* refers to a variable object that fails to have an actual manifestation.

That variable object is replaced by an actual part, or rather by a variable part that has an actual manifestation.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

**6. Conclusion**

* The notion of a structured whole is at the center of the semantics of completion-related verbs of absence: as a conceived whole and as a variable whole that permits incomplete manifestation
* The notion of a structured whole may involve structural parts, which may take the form of variable parts and as such are involved in the semantics *be missing* and *replace.*
* Natural language reflects a highly intensional notion of part-whole structure, in stark contrast to classical mereologies.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

**References**

Chomsky, N. (1981): *Lectures on Government and Binding*. DeGruyter, Amsterdam.

Condoravdi, C. R. Crouch, and M. van den Berg (2001): ‘Counting Concepts’. In R. van

Rooji and M. Stokhof (eds.): *Proceedings of the 13th Amsterdam Colloquium*, ILLC,

67-72.

Fine, K. (1999): ‘Things and Their Parts’. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 23(1), 61–74.

Fine, K. (2017): ‘Truthmaker Semantics’. In B. Hale et al. (eds.): *A Companion to the*

*Philosophy of Language* V, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford, 556–577.

Fine, K. (2020): ‘The Identity of Social Groups’. *Metaphysics* 3.1., 81-91.

Harves, S. and Kayne, R. (2012): ‘Having ‘Need’ and ‘Needing’ have’. *Linguistic Inquiry* 43.

120–132.

Koslicki, K. (2008): The Structure of Objects, Oxford UP, Oxford.

Kukso, B. (2006). ‘The Reality of Absences’. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 84(1),

21–37.

Moltmann, F. (1997): *Parts and Wholes in Semantics*. Oxford UP, Oxford.

Moltmann, F. (2018): ‘An Object-Based Truthmaker Semantics for Modals'. Philosophical

Issues 28.1, 255-288

Moltmann, F. (to appear): *Objects and Attitudes*. Oxford University Press, New York, in

press.

Oliver, A. and T. Smiley (2013): *Plural Logic*. Oxford UP. Oxford.

Saebo, K. J. (2014): ‘Do you Know what it Means to Miss New Orleans?’. In D. Gutzman et

al. (eds.): *Approaches to Meaning*. Bill, ebook Central.

Simons, P. (1987): *Parts. A* *Study in Ontology.* Oxford UP, Oxford.

Zimmermann, E. (2014): ‘What it Takes to be Missing’. In D. Gutzman et al. (eds.):

*Approaches to Meaning*. Bill, Ebook Central.