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## THE PRODUCTIVITY OF LANGUAGE: RESPONSE TO PAUL GOCHET

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**Abstract:** Paul Gochet raises several interesting issues about my Chapter 13 discussion of productivity, compositionality, the context principle, meaning, and formalization. In my response I concentrate on the question of units of meaning in relation to the context principle, and on the question of infinity and formalization.

**Keywords:** Language. Compositionality. Context principle. Meaning. Productivity.

## A PRODUTIVIDADE DA LINGUAGEM: RÉPLICA À PAUL GOCHET

**Resumo:** Paul Gochet levanta várias questões interessantes sobre minhas considerações, no capítulo 13, sobre produtividade, composicionalidade, o princípio do contexto e formalização. Concentro minha réplica na relação das unidades de significação em relação ao princípio do contexto e na questão de infinitude e de formalização.

**Palavras chave:** Linguagem. Composicionalidade. Princípio do contexto. Significado. Produtividade.

Professor Gochet raises many interesting issues about productivity, compositionality, the context principle, meaning, and formalization. In my discussion I will follow a somewhat different order.

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## 1. THE CONTEXT PRINCIPLE AND UNITS OF MEANING

My remarks on the context principle were partly directed at Quine's interpretation of Frege's dictum as claiming that the units of meaning are sentences, rather than words. In my comments I argued that whereas the meaning of a word may depend on context, in the sense of being *recognized* from the context, it need not *depend* on context in the stronger sense emphasized by Quine. I also argued that neither words nor sentences are the fundamental units of meaning, but that there is a mutual dependence between them. Prof. Gochet refers to this claim of mutual dependence as "the bi-direction thesis", and suggests it should be amended by, on the one hand, recognizing other notions of context such as discourse,<sup>1</sup> and, on the other hand, recognizing that the dependencies between the various kinds of context is not symmetrical. I agree on both counts, and Professor Gochet's discussion of discourse analysis, as well as his linguistic examples illustrating the difference between semantic, pragmatic, and syntactic dependencies are very much to the point.

But my remarks were also intended to challenge the interpretation of Frege's principle in terms of meaning dependence, and to suggest an interpretation in terms of conceptual dependence. My view is that Frege's insight was an *epistemological* insight about the order of definition of words, or concepts, rather than about units of meaning, and I emphasized that this conceptual dependence is clearly present in his definition of number.

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, Quine himself broadens his interpretation by suggesting that units of meaning may be discourses, theories, and, ultimately, the whole conceptual scheme.

## 2. INFINITY AND FORMALIZATION

In my discussion of rules in Chapter 14 (p. 91), I side with Wittgenstein's claim that "community use cannot completely determine an infinite sequence of values". Professor Gochet replies (p. 448) that he considers "extreme constructivism to be untenable", and that "divergent sequences ... occur only if we blur the distinction between the word 'use' understood as denoting a social practice and the word 'use' understood as denoting an action abiding by a norm."

The problem, however, is how to characterize the second use of 'use' without presupposing the abstract notions of function and set (or property), and the Platonistic machinery associated with them. Constructivists appeal to the notion of rule for this purpose, assuming it to be epistemologically more basic than the abstract notions, and to yield the required well defined functions and sets. My criticism of the notion of rule was directed to that form of constructivism, and I even speculate in note 34 (pp. 105-106) that Wittgenstein may have had a similar point in mind.

Since Professor Gochet accepts the abstract machinery involved in Montague's program for the formalization of natural language, I suppose he is prepared to characterize the normative use of 'use' in those terms, in which case there is no disagreement between us.

We do seem to disagree with regard to the claim that indefinite iteration of words preserves grammaticality, however. Professor Gochet holds (p. 447) that indefinite iterations of the adverb 'very' in constructions such as "very quickly", "very very quickly", "very very very quickly", etc., preserve grammaticality. In my book (p. 106, note 36) I side with Hockett's claim (1975, p. 60) that this is not so, and that a construction of the form "he left very very very ... quickly", with even one thousand iterations of 'very', is no longer a sentence of English. Although this was also part of my

discussion of rules and recursion, the more fundamental reason is that I consider natural languages to be an aspect of human interaction rather than something akin to a formal language produced by a system of recursive rules.

Professor Gochet agrees with my misgivings insofar as they are directed to Quine's project of regimentation, conceived as an attempt to formalize natural language. Whereas he views Quine's project as an ontological project, rather than a linguistic project, and hence immune to criticism on the grounds of linguistic artificiality, he considers Montague's project of formalizing English to be a successful linguistic formalization.

I agree that from a linguistic point of view Montague's work is much more interesting than Quine's, and I was very impressed when I first studied his papers in a seminar given by Barbara Partee in the early 1970's. Nevertheless, my reservations were meant to apply to it as well. The problem, as I mentioned above, is that I consider natural languages to have an entirely different character than formal languages. When Montague says—in Professor Gochet's quotation (1)—that there is no “important *theoretical* difference ... between formal and natural languages” [my emphasis], he is probably imagining a streamlined version of English composed of neat grammatical sentences, and not the kind of thing we use and hear in our day to day interactions. The project has yielded very interesting formalizations of fragments of English, and if it is ultimately successful, it may yield a very sophisticated formal language, but it will not yield something that will be useful in the marketplace.

## REFERENCES

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