SPLITTING THE CONCEPTUAL ATOM: ACQUISITIONAL EVIDENCE FOR SEMANTIC DECOMPOSITION

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Abstract

That word meaning can split into semantic components is a fundamental tenet of theories of lexical semantic, in linguistics and in cognitive psychology. In contrasts to the previous assumptions, Fodor (1998) argues that lexical concepts are ‘atomic’ rather than compositional and calls into question the validity of lexical semantic research. I examine Fodor’s theory of ‘conceptual atomism’ in the light of previous philosophical and psychological theories of concepts, and argue that his criticisms are relevant only to definitional theories of meaning. The semantic components hypothesized in recent research paradigm are not primitives invoked to compute conceptual definitions, but are those elements of meaning which have observable effects in syntax (Jackendoff, 2002; Levin, 1993). Empirical evidence may be brought to bear on such theories: two first language acquisition experiments are described in which semantic component are argued to play an integral role in the acquisition of both verbal and prepositional predicates. Splitting the conceptual atom makes it possible to explain aspects of acquisition by observing the syntactic effects of ‘quantum semantics’.