

"A TREND IN SEMANTICS": REJOINDER*

ROBERT M. W. DIXON

My article discussed two recent essays on semantics, contrasting them with each other and with my own views. The 'trend' of my title concerned a tendency towards considering pieces of language substance *within* an actual situation of occurrence (other than the situation of a linguist or philosopher's exemplificatory discussion), rather than as isolated words or sentences, considered apart from non-language patterns. The trend is discernable, to different degrees, in the recent work of linguists such as Pike, anthropologists such as Malinowski, and philosophers such as Wittgenstein and Austin. Ziff's book is a new step forward within the general trend. My own views are extremist 'situational'. Katz and Fodor, on the other hand, supply a semantic component within a Chomskian framework, this being in some ways entirely opposed to the 'situational' attitude. The first paragraph of my last section clearly identified Ziff with the trend ("Ziff's book unveils a prospect which is often distinctly more encouraging. Here we find the indication of a trend in the way philosophers are looking at language: in some respects his viewpoint is more refined than those of many linguists."¹). Katz and Fodor's theory seems too idiosyncratic, and generally inapplicable in detailed description of natural language, to be likely to start a trend; I did not suggest that it might.

Katz and Fodor do not subscribe to the view (of the trend) that one can only properly speak of the meaning of an utterance through regard to the situation in which it *was* uttered. This leads them to again insist that

* "A Trend in Semantics", an article written around review notes on Paul Ziff's *Semantic Analysis* (Cornell, 1960), Katz's review of Ziff in *Language* 38.52-69, and *The Structure of Semantic Theory* by Jerrold J. Katz and Jerry A. Fodor (mimeographed, M.I.T., 1962; a revised and truncated version published as "The Structure of a Semantic Theory" in *Language* 39.170-210), appeared in *Linguistics*, 1 (1963), pp. 30-57; Katz and Fodor's "A Reply to Dixon's 'A Trend in Semantics'" appeared in *Linguistics*, 3 (1964), pp. 19-29.

¹ "A Trend in Semantics", *Linguistics*, 1 (1963), p. 55; and see section 4.

"many sentences of English, such as 'Spinsters are unmarried', exhibit redundancies",² and to miss my point regarding the inapplicability of redundancy or ambiguity judgments: in a *particular* occurrence a listener is seldom puzzled about the meaning of any piece of language.³ Katz and Fodor continually overlook the point that a linguistic theory must be based on observation of what *does* occur, and in what circumstances; 'types of situation' (including "communication in noisy situations" and "versatility of communication"⁴) must be built into *every* linguistic description as a central component.

On five particular issues. My point that a language cannot be redundant or inadequate unless with respect to something is hardly invalidated by the observation that if the something were stated then we would have a means of measuring redundancy or inadequacy; I naturally want to know what the something is before I can envisage redundancy/inadequacy. Secondly, I mentioned that Katz and Fodor "warn the reader against construing the conception of a semantic theory proposed in this paper as attempting to present either a mechanical discovery procedure or a mechanical decision procedure for dictionary entries"⁵ and it was against this that I asked *how* they could revise some dictionary entries, as they said *would* have to be done for a semantic theory which gave "incorrect interpretations for sentences"⁶; their reply again omits to clarify this question. Thirdly, they appear to have adopted a position of retreat on the matter of a formal/informal dichotomy, giving a criterion of whether 'creative thought' is involved.⁷ Some explanation is surely required concerning 'what is creative thought?', and of the necessary procedure for deciding whether it is clearly absent or clearly present (with no inbetween judgments allowed) in any particular case.

Their point, that in order to consider only situational features above a certain probability of relevance to the meaning of a certain utterance I would have to know the probabilities of relevance of *every* possible situational feature, is valid only for *their* conception of situational features as just a set with an infinite number of discrete members. My *Linguistic*

² Jerrold J. Katz and Jerry A. Fodor, "A Reply to Dixon's 'A Trend in Semantics'", *Linguistics*, 3 (1964), p. 23.

³ If he is, he can generally ask a question to resolve the difficulty – the optimum unit for statements of meaning is usually much larger than a single 'sentence', being of the order of a 'topic-unit' (or 'chunk') – see my *What IS Language?* (in preparation).

⁴ "Reply", p. 23.

⁵ "A Trend in Semantics", p. 54.

⁶ "A Trend in Semantics", p. 54.

⁷ "Reply", p. 26.

Science and Logic (Mouton & Co, 1963) sketched a more revealing model of 'situational meaning': a language pattern is linked by pattern-correlations to a number of non-language patterns in observation, and these can in turn be linked by pattern-correlations to other non-language patterns, and so on (this concerns the 'external' component of linguistic meaning; 'internal meaning' deals with the correlations between a language pattern and other language patterns). So that each relevant situational feature is linked by a chain of correlations to the language pattern under review. The relevance probability of a certain situational pattern is always less than that of the pattern before it on its correlational chain; the least delicate statement of external meaning must contain *some* of each correlation chain emanating from the considered language pattern.

Fifthly, Katz and Fodor remark "one wonders how Dixon knows that 'bachelor girl' is a 'minority collocation'. Assumptively he has not actually counted occurrences of 'bachelor' in some corpus of English. It seems more likely that his conflation of irregularity with low probability has led him to infer from his intuitive judgment that 'bachelor girl' is somehow irregular that it must also be infrequent."⁸ In fact I *have* counted occurrences of 'bachelor' in a corpus of conversational English⁹ as part of a pilot project to investigate the descriptive meanings of words and phrases that are commonly quoted as examples in linguistic and philosophical discussions; I would hardly have been likely to make such a statement if I had *not* some empirical research upon which to base it. And I have *no* intuition that 'bachelor girl' is in any way irregular.

"Chomsky and we hold that the speaker's ability to communicate with others in his native language rests on his knowledge of the rules which structure his language."¹⁰ It is this assumption of 'linguistic rules' that consistently leads Katz and Fodor to descriptively irrelevant issues: "the set of sentences of a natural language is infinite" being a consequence of "the generative power of the linguistic rules at the speaker's disposal".¹¹ Such 'rules' are partly justified by analogies, like that between linguistic behaviour and the driving of New Yorkers, traffic rules corresponding to linguistic rules.¹² In the matter of driving, New Yorkers do have an explicit set of rules that they learn and that they consciously try to follow.

⁸ "Reply", p. 27.

⁹ Based on a sample of written English, and on transcriptions of everyday English conversation made available through the Edinburgh Lexis Research Project (supported in part by a grant from the Ford Foundation).

¹⁰ "Reply", p. 20.

¹¹ "Reply", p. 22.

¹² "Reply", p. 27.

But speakers of a language do not have explicit rules that are *consciously* followed in this way; from Plato on, the idea of language behaviour as modelled by ‘rules’ has been based on spurious analogies between action that is specifically directed and learnt according to certain rules, and language activity, which is not directed in the same sort of way. ‘Rule’ models have been consistently unrevealing, and have by-the-way established the idea of a norm of ‘correctness’ in linguistic behaviour.

My *Linguistic Science and Logic* discussed how Chomsky’s idea of grammar, and his formal criteria for ‘grammatical’, are originally based on intuitive ideas of ‘grammatical’, these in turn being derived from school-taught grammar (and only possessed by those people who have been taught grammar at school); Chomsky’s very conception of linguistic theory exploits everyday ideas about language, which are largely based on previous linguistic theories. Katz and Fodor’s analogy between home-spun notions in grammaticality and a formal explication of grammaticality, and common-sensical notions about the behaviour of bodies in motion and Newtonian physics, is only partial: every seeing man has ideas about the motions of bodies whereas not every language user has an intuition of ‘grammaticalness’.¹³ It is rather as if Einstein had based relativity theory on the everyday ideas of people who had been taught Newtonian mechanics at school.

Katz and Fodor consider the semantic ability of English speakers in terms of the difference in understanding between a number of English speakers who receive an anonymous letter containing only the sentence *S*, with the receipt of the letter by persons who do not speak English but are equipped with a completely adequate grammar of English¹⁴; this seems to me to involve an examination of everyday ideas concerning meaning and synonymy. And they then mention that *Two chairs are in the room* has as paraphrase *There are at least two things in the room and each is a chair*. It was with regard to this and other examples that I doubted whether Katz and Fodor’s ideas concerning meaning and synonymy were held by anyone besides themselves; I was not questioning their theoretical ideas, but the so-called-intuitive-ideas that these are meant to model.

It was impossible for me to give full justification for my views in “A Trend in Semantics”; longer theoretical discussions, and applications of

¹³ Linguistic research amongst aborigines in the Cairns Rain Forest region of North Queensland, Australia, has confirmed that although speakers have firm ideas concerning what is in their language, those that have not been exposed to the European tradition of grammatical teaching have no recognisable intuitions of ‘grammaticalness’.

¹⁴ “The Structure of a Semantic Theory”, *Language*, 39, pp. 174-5.

my theoretical ideas in detailed linguistic description, are in preparation.¹⁵ But my dogmatism is at least equalled by theirs. Quite trivially, they show how my failure to appreciate the worth of their conclusions stems from my rejection of their initial hypotheses. Their last paragraph applies equally against themselves, with 'Chomsky and us' and 'Dixon', and 'logical system method' and 'abstractional, observational approach', interchanged.

Our differences are straightforward: I am interested in a theory of *descriptive* linguistics, in a study of how people can be observed to use language patterns. Katz and Fodor prefer to describe "linguistic rules that the speaker has in his possession", separating these from "his misapplications of them, his memory and perceptual limitations, fluctuations in his psychological state, etc."¹⁶ (although without explaining their conception of 'perceptual limitations', 'psychological state', and so on). Much of what I say is at present largely speculation; the same would appear to apply to a large part of Katz and Fodor's theory. In order to justify and, if necessary, amend my views I am engaged in a long-term project: preparing full linguistic analyses of a selection of world languages. I maintain that only by comparing the results of such a project with a similar application of Katz and Fodor's theories can the respective worths of our approaches properly be compared.

*Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies,
Canberra*

¹⁵ *My Linguistic Science and Logic* (Janua Linguarum, Series Minor, Nr. 28) and "On Formal and Contextual Meaning", to appear in *Acta Linguistica* (Budapest), 1964, joint fasc. i/ii, provide justification for some views.

¹⁶ "Reply", p. 20.