

Natural language without semiosis

The view that natural language is *semiotic* – that it is composed of signs, which are arbitrary pairings of form and meaning – has a rich history. It is perhaps most clearly articulated in the work of Saussure (1916) and Hjelmslev (1943). It is also wrong. This much is not really “news”; anyone who has ever taken seriously the idea of contextual allomorphy or contextual allosemy knows this. But it is quite widely assumed, in practice if not in theory, that given the right model(s) of allomorphy and allosemy, a semiotic view of natural language can be salvaged. In other words, a common working assumption (if not a theoretical one) is that natural language is composed of signs after all, it’s just that the “forms” and “meanings” that are paired by these signs are much more abstract than we might have initially surmised, in a way that provides the necessary leeway to capture phenomena like allomorphy (up to and including suppletion) as well as allosemy.

In this talk, I will argue that even this weaker semiotic characterization is incorrect. With the possible exception of single-morpheme utterances (e.g. *Ugh!*), a proper model of the competence of a native speaker contains no pairings whatsoever of form and meaning. Instead, speaker competence involves: **(i)** an inventory of syntactic atoms, which are fully abstract (associated with neither form nor meaning); **(ii)** a set of mapping rules from sets of atoms to forms (“exponents”); **(iii)** a set of mapping rules from sets of atoms to meanings (“lexical meanings”). Importantly, sets (ii) and (iii) are disjoint objects; they have nothing to do with one another, except in the sense that the competence system associates derived structures (consisting of items from list (i)) with items from list (ii) as well as with items from list (iii). But the relation is necessarily indirect and mediated in this fashion.

I will discuss a collection of linguistic properties (some language-specific, and some quite general) that only make sense in light of this radically non-semiotic model. I will also discuss why existing non-lexicalist frameworks such as Distributed Morphology (Halle & Marantz 1993, 1994) and Nanosyntax (Starke 2009, Caha 2019) fall short of this explanatory goal.