

A Rejection of Semantic Holism, Based on Linguistic Relativity and Determinism

In this paper, I will argue that semantic holism is, inherently, a false claim. Semantic holism, here, being defined as the meaning of a word or expression in a given language (λ) is constructed by its relation to other words and expressions in said given language (λ) and its role in said given language (λ). The following premises support the refutability of semantic holism. The first premise being linguistic relativity, here defined as any given language (λ) contains, exclusively, the words and expressions that are necessary for completeness in the functionality of said given language (λ) so as to provide a full world view to its native speaker. The second premise being that the cultural influences, specifically present during the development of the given language (λ) and during a native speaker's acquisition of the given language, shape the semantics of the words and expressions per the syntax of a given language (λ), restricting the possibility that the meaning of words or expressions in said given language (λ) are defined relative to other words and expressions. The third premise is grounded in a form of linguistic determinism, here defined as the identification of words and expressions of given conceptual contexts across different languages (here, across the languages of Spanish and English), which substantiate that any given language (λ) can function and serve the needs of its native speakers without containing equally exact notions, being that the form of words and expressions do not need to directly translate in both semantics and application. In conclusion, the three preceding premises lead to the coherent rejection of semantic holism.

I will now show how linguistic relativity supports the belief that semantic holism is a erroneous claim. If linguistic relativity, as defined here, allows that the native speakers of any given language (λ) form and define only the words and expressions that they find essential for effective communication and understanding of their beliefs and surroundings, then linguistic relativity would guarantee the community of native speakers of the given language (λ) a wholeness of their respective world view. I will now propose two examples that support linguistic relativity. Suppose that an isolated community lives on a tropical steppe island with a yearly temperature range between 70°F and 100°F and approximately 100 centimeters of rain. The community that lives on the island speaks the language of τ , which contains words for “high temperatures”, “heat wave”, “drought”, “flood”, “heat lightning”, “thunderstorm”, “hurricane”, “rain”, “drizzle”, “fog” and “mist”. However, because the community on the island has never been exposed to nor has heard of the occurrences of snow, ice, black ice, blizzard, snow flurry, hail, haze, ice storm, sleet, and other winter weather happenings, the language of τ does not contain equivalent words or expressions. As such, the community of native speakers of τ has not formed nor defined the words or expressions that relate to the winter weather terms respectively in English as they lack the need of such words and expressions in their vocabulary in order to have a full world view. Another example in support of linguistic relativity is that of modern technology terminology. Suppose that in the year 1800 the words “television”, “satellite”, “computer”, “internet”, “cellular device”, “wireless”, “Google”, or “mp3” were mentioned, at a time when telegraphs, typewriters and telephones were yet to be invented. Whereas in the nineteenth century, the people did not

have the need for nor an understanding of aforementioned terminology, said terms have become essential in today's languages in order for today's populations to be able to effectively communicate information regarding the technology in use. As such, the native speakers of the languages of the world that have been involved in the discoveries of technology and that have interacted with the new technologies have formed, defined and adopted the words and expressions into their respective vocabularies as they found the need of such words and expressions in order to maintain a full world view.

I will now show how cultural influences further refutes the coherency of semantic holism. If cultural influences during a native speaker's acquisition of the given language (λ) shape the semantics of the words and expressions learned through the syntax of the given language (λ), then said influences restrict the possibility that the meaning of words or expressions in any given language (λ) are defined relative to other words and expressions in the given language (λ), as suggested by the belief of semantic holism. To help prove this premise, the following examples portray the semantics of idioms as dictated by the cultures and languages in which they are respectively used. Consider "curiosity killed the cat" in the English language with the figurative semantics of a warning against unwarranted inquiry and experimentation, as compared to the translation of the expression in Spanish, which literally translates to "la curiosidad mató al gato" without the figurative semantics granted by the cultural influences of English. Conversely, consider the Spanish idiom "es un arroz con mango", which literally translated means "it is a rice with mango", with the figurative semantics of a statement of the complexity of the situation, occurrence, or object granted by

the cultural influences of Spanish, mainly that rice and mango are two foods that are not mixed in a dish as they are seen as dissimilar and non-complementary in Hispanic tradition. In both of the aforementioned example idioms, the cultural influences, namely the social and historical influences, surrounding the given language (λ) and surrounding any native speaker's acquisition of the given language (λ) shape the semantics, albeit figurative in the presenting case of idioms, of the the given language (λ). Therefore, the cultural influences that surround any given language (λ) lend to the meaning of the words and expressions in any native speaker's lexicon for his or her given language (λ). Such diminishes the logical application of semantic holism to any given language (λ) as it restricts the possibility that the semantics of words or expressions in any given language (λ) are formed and defined relative to other words and expressions in the given language (λ).

Lastly, I will demonstrate how linguistic determinism also supports the refutability of semantic holism. If linguistic determinism allows that words and expressions in any given language (λ) be contained in a set of concepts (α) in a given yet infinite set of contexts (β), which meet the needs of its native speakers, then any two given languages (λ) do not need to contain words or expressions that share exactly equivalent semantics and applications provided that the words and expressions of the respective languages hold concepts (α) and contexts (β) that serve the needs of its respective native speakers. To help prove the point presented in said premise, please consider the Spanish noun, *cariño*, and the corresponding adjective, *cariñoso*, which are often translated to mean "affection, care, love" and "affectionate, caring, loving" in the English language. However, though the aforementioned

are words given for their respective translations, the concept of *cariño* and the quality of being *cariñoso* in the Spanish language, and by extension culture, are inequivalent to the words given as counter-words in the English language, and by extension culture. Despite said, the English language is not lacking in its ability to convey the near-equivalent concepts of *cariño* and the quality of being *cariñoso* as native speakers of the English language have ways that are well-within their lexicons to express any given concept in an infinite set of contexts. As such, the possibility that the semantics of words or expressions in any given language (λ) are defined solely as they relate to the semantics of the other words and expressions found in said given language (λ), as suggested by semantic holism, is a false notion because any given language (λ) defines the semantics of its words and expressions based on the needs of its native speakers and has words and expressions within its native speakers' lexicons which serve the native speakers in communication and expression.

Thus, based on linguistic relativity, the cultural influences on the semantics of any given language (λ), and linguistic determinism, semantic holism is found to be an inherently false notion. As linguistic relativity suggests that the only words and expressions found in the lexicons of native speakers of any given language (λ) is decided by the necessity of said words and expressions by the native speakers, the coherency of semantic holism, if defined as the meaning of a word or expression in a given language (λ) is constructed by its relation to other words and expressions in said given language (λ) and its role in said given language (λ), is deconstructed. Similarly, the cultural influences, particularly the social influences and historical influences, and linguistic determinism, defined as any two given languages (λ) do not need to contain words or expressions that share exactly equivalent semantics and

applications provided that the words and expressions of the respective languages hold concepts (α) and contexts (β) that serve the needs of its respective native speakers, support the refutability of semantic holism. In conclusion, semantic holism is a refutable claim.

Works Cited

“Semantic holism.” The Blackwell Dictionary of Western Philosophy. Bunnin, Nicholas and Jiyuan, Yu (eds). Blackwell Publishing, 2004. [Blackwell Reference Online](#). 25 October 2012.