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## MODERATE HOLISM: ANSWERING TO CRITICISM AND EXPLAINING LINGUISTIC PHENOMENA\*

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Resumo: *neste artigo tenho o objetivo de apresentar uma versão do holismo semântico proposta por Henry Jackman (1999a, 1999b, 2005 e 2015) intitulada “holismo semântico moderado”. Defenderei que esta versão moderada do holismo, além de responder grande parte das críticas atribuídas ao holismo semântico tradicional (como a tradução, o desacordo, a mudança de opinião e comunicação), também se faz extremamente útil para explicar a ocorrência de diversos fenômenos linguísticos, como, por exemplo: a vagueza e a polissemia.*

Palavras-chave: *Fenômenos linguísticos. Holismo semântico. Semântica. Holismo moderado.*

### MEANING HOLISM<sup>1</sup>

Meaning holism is a theory that is related to the meanings attributed to words and their relations to other words in a language. This theory supports the mutual interdependence of all items of linguistic knowledge in a way that, for example, to understand the meaning of a specific expression is necessary to understand a large sector of the language in question or even the language for completeness. Often holistic theories are derived from a more general holism that has to do with the holism of mental or cognitive

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states. Thus, meaning holism can be understood as a theory that is connected not only with the philosophy of language, but with other areas of philosophy, such as philosophy of mind, philosophy of mathematics, philosophy of science, and epistemology. The statement underlying meaning holism is as follows:

( $\alpha$ ) The meaning of an expression depends on the whole or an important part of the language to which it is subordinated.

In philosophy of language, we can find different interpretations of the concept of meaning holism, although most have the same basis in the statement ( $\alpha$ ). It may be believed that the main difference between the various conceptions of meaning holism is in the way it is used. In the statement ( $\alpha$ ) two parts can be identified: (i) one party argues that the meaning of an expression depends on the totality of the language to which it belongs; (ii) another party arguing that the meaning of an expression depends on an important part of the language to which it belongs. Defend this seems problematic because it directly involves the knowledge of the world and the language of the people who are interpreting the expressions. In addition to these two parts, we can inquire about the minimum limits to consider a system as a linguistic system or language proper - as proposed by Weir (1985). For example, to know the meaning of the term "rabbit", it is necessary to know (i) the entire linguistic system of the English language or at least (ii) a large part of this linguistic system. The fact of knowing the meaning of the word "rabbit" referring to a lagomorphic mammal of the *Leporidae* family, which has a thick, soft coat with large eyes and ears that measure, on average, 34 to 50cm, according to a meaning holist, this information is dependent on the domain that a person has of the linguistic system in question - in this case, the English language.

The various definitions of meaning holism deal with the relations that the meanings of the expressions of a language hold with the contents of the beliefs<sup>2</sup> related to them. These two aspects are what is common between the different concepts of meaning holism and the relationship between meaning and belief will be what I will consider as more important in the definition that I propose in this text. I will define meaning holism in the following way:

( $\beta$ ) The meaning of an expression  $x$  in a language  $\varphi$  is linked to the meaning of the other expressions of the language  $\varphi$ , as well as the beliefs attributed to the  $\varphi$  speakers.

From this perspective, the important role of the speaker's beliefs in the determination of meaning in these systems, precisely because the version of meaning holism that I will defend later has as its premise the negation of the "Instability Thesis", which argues that if there is a change of belief, necessarily there will be a change of meaning. This theory was for many years (and still is) erroneously related to the concept of meaning holism. Next, I will present a new interpretation<sup>3</sup> of the concept of meaning holism developed by Henry Jackman (1999a, 1999b, 2005 and 2015).

## SOME ARGUMENTS AGAINST MEANING HOLISM

As mentioned earlier, most of the interpretations made in the last 70 years on the theory of meaning holism are quite radical. These interpretations generally relate meaning

holism to an Instability Thesis (also called "total change", which makes holism a theory vulnerable to a series of problems.) I will present four well-known problems that are directed to meaning holism: (i) change of mind, (ii) creative inference, (iii) language learning, and (iv) communication.

The argument about the change of mind derives from the role of beliefs in the determination of meanings in languages, that is, of semantic instability. This perspective has been addressed by many philosophers such as Jerry Fodor in "Psychosemantics: The Problem of Meaning in the Philosophy of Mind" (1987), Fodor and Lepore in "Why Meaning (Probably) Is not Conceptual Role" (1993), and Hilary Putnam in "Meaning Holism" (1986). It is possible to interpret this argument in three variations which together form the general argument:

□ Two people cannot disagree on anything and cannot agree on anything unless they agree on everything.

In fact, if two people have different beliefs, then the meaning they give to the sentences they utter - to all these sentences - will also be different. If one person agrees with one sentence and does not agree with another, it is not an authentic case of disagreement, because one cannot have the same content that one believes, and the other does not. Much less can it be that the two people attribute different truth values to the same content. If the same two people agree to ascribe the same truth value to the same sentence, then there is no coincidence in their beliefs either. For example:

( $\gamma$ ) The dog hates cats.

The sentence ( $\gamma$ ) has several elements and the interlocutors will have to share the same beliefs so that these elements have the meaning that they have. For two people in a communicative relationship to agree or disagree with this sentence, they will have to have the same beliefs about the words "dog", "hate" and "cats". If any of these beliefs fail to do same, the two people will not have the same meanings for the words and, consequently, they will not be able to agree the one in disagreement regarding this sentence.

□ A person cannot change his mind about anything, because by changing his opinion, there is a consequent change of beliefs.

Change of mind is to make a change in the real value that is assigned to a certain content attributable. Nevertheless, if a person changes belief, then the meaning of the terms of his language varies, because there is no same content that was previously rejected and is now accepted, or rather was accepted and is now rejected. Thus, broadly speaking, a person who takes on meaning holism cannot change his mind about anything. A fact that problematizes the relation of meaning to human behavior because it makes it unintelligible for a person to simply change his mind or change his preferences. Consider the following example:

( $\delta$ ) Man X hates mustard.

( $\epsilon$ ) Man X loves mustard.

Be the same man "X" in the sentences ( $\delta$ ) and ( $\epsilon$ ) and assume the meaning holism. The opposition between these two sentences is impossible. The contradiction between the two sentences eliminates the common meaning of the object of love or hate. If "mustard"

means something a person loves, then if a person comes to hate, the meaning of "mustard" should also vary. The change of mind over time would not be intelligible in a holistic perspective of meaning.

□ Because of these facts, we cannot make actual intentional generalizations about other people's beliefs and there are no good intentional explanations either.

To understand which beliefs a person possesses one must understand what attributable content is one that one accepts or rejects, but the only way one has access to such content is through the sentences these people assert or not. However, there is no way to know what meaning is attributed to such sentences without knowing the totality of their beliefs and to know the totality of people's beliefs about objects and their infinite possibilities of combinations would be a task of unimaginable difficulty.

The argument of "creative inference" is also very problematic for meaning holism. This argument also relates to the speaker's beliefs in determining meanings. According to this argument, a person could derive inferential consequences from the statements that one believes, but it is not possible to draw new valid conclusions, since if the conclusion of the inference is not something that a person already creates, then the terms in this conclusion will mean something different from that apparently identical terms mean on the premises, making inference invalid (JACKMAN, 2014). Consider the example:

Considering these two descriptive inferences:

(ζ) Toxic waste cause damage to the environment.

(η) Rivers suffer from the contamination caused by toxic waste.

It is a creative inference, derived from assumptions from (ζ) and (η):

(θ) In the future, the city will have water supply problems due to contamination of rivers.

In this example two premises can be observed that describe information about "toxic waste". Suppose two speakers have the same beliefs, and therefore the terms used by these speakers mean the same things. In (ζ) the effect of "toxic waste" on the environment is indicated, while in (η) a consequence of toxic waste action is indicated in a specific situation. Up to this point there are no problems for the "traditional" meaning holist, because as was emphasized earlier, the two people share the same beliefs about (ζ) and (η). But the moment one of the two people obtains the conclusion (θ), there is an "inferential role" that for this person a "toxic waste" possesses, which the other person does not have. In (θ) there is new information that requires new beliefs, and, in this way, they require new meanings. Thus, assuming the traditional characterization of meaning holism, it is not possible to admit any creative inference.

The argument about language learning was widely advocated by the philosopher Michael Dummett. According to Jönsson (2014), Dummett's argument regarding language learning has been described at least in two different moments of his philosophical work. In a first critique, Dummett in Frege: Philosophy of Language (1973) attacks Quinean holism:

A thoroughgoing holism, while it may provide an abstract intelligible model of language, fails to give a credible account either of how we use language as an instrument of communication, or of how we acquire a mastery of language. A mastery of a holistic language would have to be taken as a grasp of a relation defined over all possible total theories (within the language as syntactically determined) and all experiences: when the relation holds we may say that the experience is conformable to the theory, otherwise that it

is recalcitrant to it. When a recalcitrant experience occurs, a revision in the theory is called for: and the admissible revisions will be just those that yield a theory to which the recalcitrant experience and all other previous experiences are conformable. Holism demands that this conformability relation should not be derivable from any meaning properties of the constituent sentences of the theory, but be defined directly for total theories taken as units (DUMMETT, 1973, p. 597-8).

And on the next page, Dummett (1973, p. 599) continues his argument as follows:

The situation is essentially similar to that of a language all of whose sentences consist of single words, i.e. have no internal semantic structure... it becomes unintelligible how the speakers of the language could have come to associate these senses with their unitary sentences... In the same way, if a total theory is represented as indecomposable into significant parts, then we cannot derive its significance from its internal structure, since it has none; and we have nothing else from which we may derive it.

In these two quotations of Dummett's text one can identify the difficulty in determining meaning in a language in its entirety. To master the use of a language whose meanings were holistic, the speaker should have a definite knowledge regarding all total possible theories, either in syntactic aspect or the semantic aspect. In the second quotation, Dummett demonstrates his disbelief about how a speaker could come to understand the meaning of sentences in which words appear that have no internal semantic structure (because they are dependent on other words). According to Jönsson (2014), in these two cases of Dummett (1973), it is possible to identify problems about language learning insofar as Dummett proposes a specific version of the "general rhetorical question": "how can we acquire *that* (some impressive capacity) if we do not acquire it like *this* (some plausible account in terms of meaningful parts)?" (JÖNSSON, 2014, p. 728).

Dummett (1976, p. 44) also presented years later another argument against holism, in his text "What is as the Theory of Meaning? (II)", dealing mainly with the incompatibility of meaning holism with the acquisition of language. In his words:

The difference between a molecular and a holistic view of language is not that, on a molecular view, each sentence could, in principle, be understood in isolation, but that on a holistic view, it is impossible fully to understand any sentence without knowing the entire language, whereas on a molecular view, there is for each sentence a determinate fragment of the language a knowledge of which will suffice for a complete understanding of that sentence. Such a conception allows for the arrangement of sentences and expressions of the language in a partial ordering, according as the understanding of one expression is or is not dependent upon the prior understanding of another. (That it be, or approximate to being, a partial ordering, with minimal elements, seems to be required if we are to allow for the progressive acquisition of a language. On a holistic view, on the other hand, the relation of dependence is not asymmetric, and in fact obtains between any one expression and any other: there can be nothing between not knowing the language at all and knowing it completely.

In this quotation we can identify a new view on the problem, since it is not dealing with the lack of internal semantic structure of a holistic language. Admitting a holistic view of language, one cannot think of the acquisition of language as a process. Assuming holism,

or a person knows nothing or knows everything. According to Dummett (1976), a language that is progressively acquired implies that it is possible to understand a sentence of a language without knowing the whole language, which is incompatible with the holistic view of the language interpreted in this case (JÖNSSON, 2014, p.730).

The conclusion of his argument is that if a person cannot learn a language gradually, expression by expression, it is a mystery how she could learn a language at all. In Dummett's proposal, language learning - as it is understood in its conception of meaning holism - is mysteriously problematic, considering that the learning of any language takes place gradually.

There is a variant of Dummett's argument about language learning that is important to mention and has to do with the possibility of communication - this can be found in his book *Frege: Philosophy of Language* (1973, p.599) - which assumes that, admitting meaning holism in a communicative situation, the listener understands what the speaker said only if the listener fully knows the speaker's language. In other words, communication is impossible, except in cases where there are two people who agree on everything in all beliefs in every possible way, which seems unlikely.

Dummett further asserts that a person X cannot suppose that another person Y has the same linguistic confirmation relation as X. Although Y knows the "total theory" of the meaning of X completely, this would not suffice to understand X, because it would be necessary to know also the relevant confirmation relation, i.e., it would be necessary to know what kind of experiences are or are not evidences for the sentences of the language of X.

Considering the four arguments against traditional meaning holism that I have presented in the previous paragraphs, I will present a version of meaning holism that answers these three arguments (and others more), just as it is sufficient to explain a series of linguistic phenomena that are generally treated as problems for interpreting texts. In the next section I will present "moderate holism". A version of meaning holism that is stable enough to answer these arguments.

## MODERATE HOLISM

Jackman (1999a), in his text *Moderate Holism and Instability Thesis*, presented his first proposal on a version of traditional meaning holism. In addition to this publication, the author presented elements for understanding his proposal in three other papers. My purpose in this section will be to outline Jackman's version to then explain the reasons that make this version sufficient to overturn the four arguments against holism (As Jackman argued in its first 1999 text) that I presented in the previous section, as well as explain how moderate holism is useful to explain some linguistic phenomena.

Jackman (1999a) presents the main problems that traditional meaning holism carries with it, demonstrating that in most cases philosophers interpret meaning holism in a "radical" way, and for this reason many problems are attributed to this theory. The main one is the interpretation that meaning holism and the Instability Thesis go hand in hand. Jackman questions this interpretation and argues that the Instability Thesis may be a consequence of some versions of meaning holism, but holism and instability can effectively be treated separately.

The most well-known problems in the philosophical literature attributed to traditional meaning holism are those I presented in the previous section: change of mind, creative

inference, language learning and communication. These four problems related to holism are understood by Jackman as problems related not to holism, but to the Instability Thesis. As the Instability Thesis presents itself, arguing that if there is a change of belief, there will necessarily be a change of meaning and relating this theory directly to meaning holism, a defense of traditional holism becomes extremely complicated.

In addition to presenting a perspective of meaning holism separate from the Instability Thesis, Jackman argues that his thesis is the denial<sup>5</sup> of the Instability Thesis, naming it "moderate holism". This version is presented in a part of the text in which Jackman (1999a) proposes that one can distinguish moderate versions of holism, which treat the functions of beliefs in relation to meanings as many-to-one, allowing variations in beliefs without necessarily producing variations of meaning. Jackman also refers to the version of holism that is committed to the Instability Thesis as "radical holism". Thus "radical holism" can be distinguished as the version of holism that has been treated by most philosophers over the past 70 years and "moderate holism"<sup>6</sup> as the version that separates the commitment of holism with the Instability Thesis.

Jackman is sympathetic to Donald Davidson's philosophy and this becomes very clear in all four papers in which he describes his moderate meaning holism. In view of this, Jackman (1999a) argues that the "Principle of Charity" can lead to a kind of moderate holism. This theory was first presented by Neil L. Wilson (1959) and later developed by Davidson (1973). The Principle of Charity, broadly speaking, suggests that one speaker should interpret the reference of another speaker's terms maximizing the truth of the total number (or some weighted amount) of sentences that the speaker creates. Jackman argues that the practice of the Principle of Charity is undoubtedly holistic. His use of this theory in relation to his moderate holism must do mainly with the realization that two people can assign the same meanings to the same things through their words, despite having different beliefs about them, because the function between their beliefs and what they mean by their words is that which produces the same output from inputs, often different. This means that although there are no two speakers who may have the same beliefs about an object, the tools that maximize the truth of their belief sets may be the same.

The most important point to be discussed in the inaugural text of Jackman's moderate holism (1999a) is about how the relationships between beliefs and meanings in his theory come about. Jackman argues in his text that, from moderate holism, the relation of beliefs to meanings in a language should be considered "many-to-one", that is, it is possible to have many beliefs related to a meaning, and not necessarily have only one-to-one meaning - what is advocated by "radical holists" and severely criticized by its critics. The question that arises at the end of a reading of Jackman's inaugural text of moderate holism (1999a) is: how does this many-to-one relationship occur? Or rather, if it is possible to have many beliefs for a meaning, how can one determine which belief will determine the change of meaning attributed to an object?

These questions arise from the fact that a radical holist holds that if there is a change of belief, there will necessarily be a change of meaning - which sustains the direct commitment that radical holism maintains with the Instability Thesis. But Jackman proposes that this interpretation should be forgotten because nothing prevents one from dealing with separate holism and the Instability Thesis, but does not explain in his first 1999 text how such a relationship between beliefs and meanings works, in which a person can have many

beliefs in relation to an object and not necessarily the meaning attributed to that object will change, but there are beliefs that will change the meaning. So, what is the mechanics of this relationship?

Indeed, if Jackman's presentation of moderate holism had been in the description made in his 1999a text, his theory would be unsustainable. But the answers to the questions listed above were readily answered in their later texts, especially in the 1999b and 2015 texts.

Jackman (1999b) presents the relationship of its moderate version to "context sensitivity". Thus, he presents what he calls "contextual holism." He argues that context sensitivity offers a more decisive response when it is related to holism, rather than relating it to issues such as ambiguity or indexicality. It is well known that radical meaning holism is generally characterized as a theory in which the meaning of a person's words is a function of all the beliefs he has about these words. From this intuition, Jackman begins to use holism as a theory fit to treat the contextual aspects of the meaning of the words in a semantic theory, discussion that was absent in its first text of 1999.

What Jackman failed to explain in his 1999a text on the many-to-one relationship is demonstrated by explaining a holistic contextual theory. Jackman (1999b) proposes from this perspective that some beliefs are more important to one speaker than others, and preserving the truth of these beliefs will have a higher priority for a person than preserving the truth of the beliefs assigned with less weight (JACKMAN, 1999b, p.145). The author presents some examples in relation to his proposal, usually using proper names. One of them is about the proper name "Aristotle":

With respect to a name like "Aristotle", for instance, a belief like "*The Nichomachean Ethics*, *The Politics*, and *The Poetics* are works of Aristotle's" will typically have greater weight than a belief like "*On Sleep*, *On Divination in Sleep* and *On Dreams* are works of Aristotle's." If our use of "Aristotle" could be historically traced back to two Macedonians, one of whom wrote the former set, the other of whom wrote the latter set, then (all else being equal) we would probably say that by "Aristotle" we meant the one who wrote *The Nichomachean Ethics* (JACKMAN, 1999b, p.146).

In this example Jackman presents the sensitivity to the context treated earlier, but now with the "weight" of the beliefs involved in the various possible contexts. In this specific case of a proper name, one can observe that the weight of beliefs in the relation with the name "Aristotle" is directly related to the recognition of his works. The better known as *The Nichomachean Ethics*, *The Politics* and *The Poetics* are treated with stronger (stronger) beliefs, whereas when a person relates "Aristotle" to *On Sleep*, *On Divination in Sleep* or *On Dreams* they are treated with lower beliefs (weaker). But this is not enough, according to Jackman (1999b). These weights are contextually sensitive and can be exemplified by making the situation more complex. Taking the general context presented in the example of the proper name "Aristotle" and applying it to particular cases, Jackman suggests that the reader imagine a person writing a thesis on *On Divination in Sleep*. In this case, the belief that Aristotle is the writer of the second set of texts presented would have more weight for this person than the first. To better understand this relationship, Jackman (1999b, p. 146) emphasizes:

The context which the weighing is sensitive to is thus not our physical context, but rather our interests at the time of utterance. Once such weighted totals are in the picture, holistic accounts can allow for changes of meaning without changes of beliefs. It is not the beliefs themselves, but rather how heavily they are weighed, that can change from context to context.



Thus, one can clearly understand by which path the moderate holism he proposes follows. What was presented in his first paper of 1999, the many-to-one relationship is based on the sensitivity to the context to which beliefs are subjected in the various interactions in a language. The weights of beliefs will determine which of these will be the ones that will modify the central meaning of the words and such decisions are directly related to the interests of the speakers at the time they make their inferences.

Already in his 2005 text, Jackman inserts another element in understanding his moderate holism. The author relates meaning holism to the distinction between descriptive semantics<sup>7</sup> and foundational semantics (or metasemantics). Jackman's moderate holism is committed to foundational semantics (an assertion corroborated in Jackman's text of 2015) and from this perspective one must understand that by adopting this position the moderate holist is committed to the fact that the meaning is directly related with the facts that give the expressions their semantic values through the different contexts in which the speakers are inserted. The moderate holist adopts Stalnaker's<sup>8</sup> (1997) and Davidsonian<sup>9</sup> perspective of the treatment of foundational semantics, that is, holistic foundational semantics is one that not only tries to answer the reasons why words mean what they mean, but also that which generates descriptive semantics. In the sequence I will explain how moderate holism responds to the four arguments that I have described in this text and how this theory is useful to explain the occurrence of some linguistic phenomena.

#### ANSWERING CRITICISM AND EXPLAINING LINGUISTIC PHENOMENA

As it was described at the beginning of this text, my goals are to (i) demonstrate how the moderate version of Holism proposed by Jackman gives an account of the main problems related to radical meaning holism, as well as (ii) explain the occurrence of some linguistic phenomena.

The problem, related to radical holism called "change of mind", which argues that if two people have different beliefs about objects, their meanings for objects will also be different. As radical meaning holism is committed to the Instability Thesis, there is no apparent solution to this problem. On the other hand, admitting the moderate holism proposed by Jackman, in which it is possible to admit different beliefs related to a same meaning, this theory gives account of the change of opinion, because the change of meaning does not depend on the simple conceptual fact defended by the Instability Thesis, but rather depends on how the speaker relates his beliefs in the different contexts in which he may be inserted.

In relation to the problem called "creative inference", this is also established by the fact that radical meaning holism is directly committed to the Instability Thesis. It is worth remembering that this problem suggests that meaning holism is implausible by the fact that if a language speaker draws valid new conclusions about facts that he has already attributed to ancient beliefs, it will necessarily demand the complete change of meaning that is related to such a belief, there being a substitution of the old belief for the new, not being possible to have a sum of the two. Moderate holism is not amenable to this kind of problem because, as has already been said, it is not committed to the Instability Thesis and effectively admits that it is possible to have many beliefs related to a meaning, enabling the increase of the depth of each meaning, that is, when there are a great number of beliefs linked to a meaning, in this case, multiple creative inferences.

In relation to language learning, a problem for radical meaning holism, because this traditional version of holism does not admit the fact that language learning occurs in a gradual and not total way, the moderate holism proposed by Jackman does not is affected and resolves this criticism. In the moderate version of holism, also independent of the instability theory, the process of language learning is understood as a process of increasing beliefs about objects in the creation of meanings. It is not necessary to know the whole language so that a person can use it in an effective way, after all, not even the natives themselves of the languages, in general, do not know all the words and all the meanings in their linguistic systems. Moderate holism admits the gradual role of language learning.

Finally, the problem of communication, which has been attributed to radical meaning holism by the simple fact that radical holism is committed to the Instability Thesis, in the same way as the others, does not affect the version proposed by Jackman. The problem of communication is in relation to radical holism because in admitting radical holism in the communicative context, an interlocutor will only understand what the speaker is saying if the two are in agreement with everything in all beliefs in all possible ways, which is very unlikely. Any difference of belief among the speakers, according to radical holism, will result in the impossibility of communication. Moderate holism solves this problem by the fact that, in addition to not being committed to the Instability Thesis, moderate holism commits itself to the Principle of Charity and to contextualism. It follows that in a communicative context, any difference between beliefs among the speakers will be shaped charitably by the ultimate goal of communication. The mere fact that two speakers do not have the same beliefs about an object will not result in a lack of communication. Moderate holism argues that communication is a process that occurs in practice, a result of the weights that speakers give to beliefs according to their communicative interests.

In relation to the moderate holism in explaining some linguistic phenomena, I intend to present in this text the example of two well-known: vagueness and polysemy. The presentation will be restricted to the concepts of these linguistic phenomena.<sup>10</sup>

The vagueness is, in general, a linguistic phenomenon that occurs when it cannot determine whether a particular term is true or false in relation to an object. This phenomenon occurs when there are problematic cases in relation to the use of the term that are not conclusive to confirm the truth or falsity of a sentence. On the other hand, polysemy is a linguistic phenomenon that consists of the multiplicity of meanings attributable to the same word.

Both vagueness and polysemy can be explained through moderate meaning holism. I argue that these linguistic phenomena are not language problems, let alone interpretation problems. I believe that they are intrinsic phenomena of languages and are occurrences that are overcome by a moderate holistic view of the language. Vagueness only becomes problematic if the interpreter only observes a single context, ignoring the assignment of parameters to specify what is really meant by the expression defined as "vague." The understanding that beliefs have their weights according to the contexts in which the speaker is inserted offers sufficient tools to understand that vagueness is nothing more than an atomistic restriction of understanding the meaning of an expression or sentence. As the speaker broadens the reading of a vague sentence, with the assignment of specifying parameters, which are the result of the sum of more beliefs related to the elements of the sentence, the said "problem" disappears and the moderate meaning holism supports this holistic perspective contextual. As for polysemy, in the same way, moderate holism, through foundational semantics (or metasemantics)

and contextualism, responds to this linguistic phenomenon directly. Polysemy occurs by the simple fact that object-related beliefs and their consequent meanings vary according to the contexts that are inserted and according to the weight that speakers offer to these beliefs context by context.

Finally, in this text I aimed to present a discussion about this theory that has an important role in the philosophy of language and linguistic semantics for at least the last 70 years, which is meaning holism. This paper presents my first reflections on this innovative version of this theory, the "moderate holism" proposed by Jackman (1999a; 1999b; 2005b; 2015), responding to the most famous problems attributed to radical meaning holism, as well as the reflection of this theory within the field of linguistic phenomena, in my view, is a very fruitful proposition for the academic philosophical and linguistic community, given that moderate holism has been little discussed in the field of philosophy in relation to semantic linguistics.

## HOLISMO SEMÂNTICO MODERADO: RESPONDENDO A CRÍTICAS E EXPLICANDO FENÔMENOS LINGUÍSTICOS

*Abstract: in this paper I present a version of the meaning holism proposed by Henry Jackman (1999a, 1999b, 2005 and 2015) entitled "moderate holism" and a reflection on this theory related to linguistic semantics. I argue that this moderate version of holism, in addition to responding to much of the criticism attributed to traditional meaning holism (such as translation, disagreement, change of mind and communication), is extremely useful to explain the occurrence of several linguistic phenomena, such as vagueness and polysemy.*

*Keywords: Linguistic phenomena. Meaning holism. Semantics. Moderate holism.*

### Notas

- 1 The ideas that resulted in this paper were presented at PhiLang 2017, Łódź, Poland. I would like to thank Professor Peter Pagin and Piotr Stalmaszczyk for the criticisms, comments and suggestions made during my presentation.
- 2 The concept of belief in this text should be understood under the following basic characteristics: (i) it is the attitude of commitment to a particular notion; (ii) this commitment may or may not be justified by the objective validity of the notion, just as it does not; (iii) the compromise turns the notion into a "rule of action"; (iv) Finally, as a "rule of action" a belief may produce in certain fields the realization or the refutation (ABBAGNANO, 1993, p. 262).
- 3 At least three other authors have dealt with moderate versions of meaning holism over the past 35 years. See Moulines (1986), Warfield (1993) and Pagin (1997).
- 4 Jackman states that his version of holism can be understood from elements presented in his four texts: *Moderate Holism and Instability Thesis* (1999a), *Holism, Relevance and Thought Content* (1999b), *Descriptive Atomism and Foundational Holism: Semantics between the Old Testament and the New* (2005) and, finally, *Externalism, Metasemantic Contextualism and Self-knowledge* (2015), not necessarily in this order. The texts offer elements that complement each other.
- 5 Because the Instability Thesis defend the function one-to-one and the moderate holism defend the function many-to-one.
- 6 For that reason, when I mention "radical meaning holism", I will be following Jackman's interpretation. The one that relates this expression to the interpretations of which the meaning holism is directly compromised with the Instability Thesis.

- 7 Jackman presents the concepts of descriptive and foundational semantics, following the proposal of Stalnaker (1997). Thus, one can understand descriptive semantics as a theory that tries to define what is the semantics for a language without saying how this language is in practice. This theory has the role of assigning semantic values to language expressions and explaining how the semantic values of complex expressions are a function of the semantic values of their parts. On the other hand, foundational semantics (or metasemantics) tries to answer questions about what are the facts that give the expressions their semantic values or, in general, about what makes the language spoken by a specific community have a semantic description. This theory, in turn, investigates not the meaning of words structurally speaking, but through the use of language in different contexts, as well as having the function of explaining what makes a semantic theory the most appropriate.
- 8 Regarding the structure of the relationship between descriptive semantics and metasemantics.
- 9 Concerning the application of the theory.
- 10 In this paper I will not present examples with linguistic *corpus*.

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