XI

Two ways to smoke a cigarette

1 Introduction

One of Frege's legacies is his insistence upon the compositional character of language. In his system, the senses of complex expressions are composed of the senses of their parts; and the referent of a complex is determined by the referents of those of its parts which are supposed to have referents. Many philosophers who would not think of themselves as Fregean regard these theses or their analogues as virtually truistic. Certainly, there is a truism in the area: we understand sentences thanks to understanding the words of which they are composed and how these words are arranged. But this is far from yielding anything deserving to be called a "principle of compositionality". Many such principles, as in Frege's own work, take it for granted that meanings are entities, and this is not truistic (as shown in essay X above).[1] All versions assume that there is some correct interpretation of the view that simple expressions have meaning "in isolation", independently of their occurrence in complexes; this seems to be inconsistent with Frege's "context principle": "never to ask for the meaning of a word in isolation, but only in the context of a proposition" (Frege 1884: *x*). When we reflect upon what animated this remark of Frege's, we become aware of various possibilities of circularity: perhaps the meaning or sense of a simple is, by definition, just whatever it contributes to the meaning or sense of the larger wholes into which it enters, in which case some sort of compositionality is true by definition. This may also happen in another way: for the thesis to have any bite, it must be relativized to a syntax for the language, which will tell us when we have an occurrence of a simple expression (there is no occurrence of the

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1 For example: "the meanings of complex expressions . . . are constructed from the meanings of the less complex expressions . . . that are their constituents" (Fodor and Lepore 2001: 350–1). The commitment to meanings as entities is also present in versions which make use of functionality, for example "The meaning of a compound expression is a function of the meaning of its parts" (Janssen 1997: 419). Presumably this requires there to be functions whose arguments and values are meanings.

word "gnat" in indignation"). But if a constraint on syntax is that it identify simple expressions in such a way as to respect compositionality, another kind of circularity looms. The theme of this paper is that the compositionality of natural language is not to be taken for granted, and that an appropriate argumentative strategy is not some attempt at a global proof that our language is or is not compositional, but a detailed study of examples of the apparent failure of compositionality.

Traditionally the main explanandum for compositionality has been linguistic novelty or creativity, something alluded to by Frege in these words:

> It is astonishing what language can do. With a few syllables it can express an incalculable number of thoughts, so that even a thought grasped by a terrestrial being for the very first time can be put into a form of words which will be understood by someone to whom the thought is entirely new. This would be impossible, were we not able to distinguish parts in the thoughts corresponding to the parts of a sentence, so that the structure of the sentence serves as an image of the structure of the thoughts. (Frege 1923: 390)

Our capacity to deal with novelty was also mentioned by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*:

> 4.027 It belongs to the essence of a proposition that it should be able to communicate a *new* sense to us.
> 4.03 A proposition must use old expressions to communicate a new sense. This much is delivered by the truism

Indexicality shows that novelty in this context is a slippery notion: an utterance may put something familiar to an unfamiliar use. If compositionality is well motivated by our capacity to handle novelty, it should be well motivated by the novel use of familiar words. In short, compositionality ought to apply to expression tokens, and not just to expression types.

2 Understanding utterances: covert indexicality as a resource for compositionalists

One understands utterances thanks to understanding the words used in making them; but indexicality shows that other cognitive resources are involved as well. For example, one must use general cognitive skills to identify the referent of a demonstrative use of a pronoun like "that". If understanding and meaning are correlative, the need for non-semantic skills to arrive at understanding might suggest a failure of compositionality, for it would be correlative with finding a meaning for the whole which goes beyond the meaning of the parts.

The obvious defence of compositionality in the face of this point will

adopt the kind of structure found in Kaplan's distinction between character and content (Kaplan 1977). Whenever used, the familiar character of an indexical word calls for the exercise of a recognitional skill on that occasion. A skill exercised at the behest of a semantic rule can be classified as belonging to understanding, so the occasion-specific identification of content also belongs to understanding. Very roughly, the rule for "I" is that it is to refer to the speaker of the utterance in which it occurs, and for "elle" that it is to refer to something of feminine gender made suitably salient in the context. To understand an utterance containing a demonstratively used pronoun involves knowing the relevant general rule *and* applying it in the specific context. This conception of understanding seems to compose: one understands an utterance of "Elle a faim" if one uses the rule for "elle" to come to know to whom or what it refers on the occasion, and appreciates that that entity has been said to be hungry. I shall assume that indexicality poses no threat to an appropriately formulated thesis of compositionality, and hence a defender of compositionality should be happy to classify an apparent counterexample as nothing more than an example of indexicality.

A serious utterance of "It's raining" is normally (perhaps always) taken to say that it's raining at some particular place and some particular time. The temporal element can be classified with "I" and "elle" as a manifestation of overt indexicality: the rule for the present tense says (ignoring such complications as the historic present) that the relevant time is the time of utterance, so understanding the utterance involves understanding it as saying, concerning the time of utterance, that it is raining *then*. But there seems to be no expression which in this way introduces the place of which rain is predicated, so utterances like this appear to be counterexamples to compositionality: as uttered at different places, the sentence has different meanings, but these meanings seem to be a function of the place of utterance and not of the meanings of the parts (cf. Crimmins and Perry 1989).[2]

Although this phenomenon can be treated in more than one way, the response I wish to highlight for the subsequent discussion is that of attributing *covert indexicality*. On this view, at some level of description of the sentence (its "logical form"), there is an implicit variable for places, and understanding an utterance of the sentence requires the understander to identify the appropriate place (cf. Stanley 2000). If indexicality in general is consistent with compositionality for utterances, then so is covert indexicality.

By contrast, the distinction between referential and attributive uses of definite descriptions as a pragmatically determined difference in truth conditions

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2   "Our semantics is not compositional, but there is system in the noncompositional mayhem" (Crimmins and Perry 1989: 711). Systematicity is their substitute for compositionality. In fact, on their view it would seem that *propositions* are compositional, even if sentences are not.

arguably does pose a threat to compositionality. The idea is that for some description sentences there is no lexical or structural ambiguity, but proper understanding of an utterance of one involves selecting one or other truth condition, the singular truth condition appropriate to the referential reading, or the existentially general truth condition appropriate to the attributive, and that this is to be done on a holistic contextual basis.[3] This selection is not based upon an understanding of any part of the utterance but is required for understanding. So understanding the whole goes beyond an understanding of the parts.

The compositionalist, therefore, cannot accept every form of "pragmatic ambiguity" as consistent with his thesis, but can accept the form of pragmatic ambiguity induced by indexicality. In what follows, I consider covert indexicality as a way in which a defender of compositionality might deal with apparent counterexamples; though the main thrust of the paper is that most of the counterexamples are not really ambiguous at all. If this is right, the compositionalist has no case to answer.

3 Apparent counterexamples to compositionality

In the following examples, the compounds are supposed to be ambiguous, while their parts and manner of construction have no relevant ambiguity. The conclusion is supposed to be that their meaning (any one of the various meanings they ambiguously possess) goes beyond the meaning of the parts, so that they are counterexamples to compositionality. (The examples are consistent with the truism, since even in such cases understanding the words plays some part in understanding the compound, enough to justify "thanks to".)

1   adjectival modification:
    (a) "Italian book": book in Italian, book about Italy, book made in Italy, book in the pile to take to Italy?[4]
    (b) "feline care": care for, by, of or in the manner of felines?
2   genitives:
    (a) "John's leg": one (which?) of the limbs composing John's body, or the leg which John, a student of anatomy, is dissecting?

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3 Presentations of the referential/attributive distinction as this kind of pragmatic ambiguity are given by, for example, Stalnaker (1970: 41–3), Récanati (1993: 282–3), Bezuidenhout (1997). Récanati makes a good case for this having been Donnellan's original intention, though one misunderstood by many commentators. A compositionalist who accepts Donnellan's data about the truth values of utterances containing definite descriptions will see this as a manifestation of lexical ambiguity: cf. Evans (1982: 325).
4 Perhaps "Italian" is both noun (denoting a language or a native of Italy) and adjective. These examples are supposed to keep the adjectival form, though ambiguity about which form is at issue can arise.

   (b) "John's table": the/a table John owns, has sold, has bought, has bor-
       rowed, has lent, wants to use, often uses, made . . .?
3   compounded nouns:
   (a) "sand cleaner": something which cleans sand or which uses sand to
       clean?
   (b) "hi-tec management": management of a business producing or ser-
       vicing hi-tec things, or management by methods involving hi-tec?
4   noun + verb
   (a) "John runs": with his legs? Or like butter runs when hot, or paint
       runs when wet, or like the Thames runs from Oxford to London?
   (b) "John smokes": cigarettes? or emits smoke (like Etna)?
5   The Travis effect:
   (a) "Those leaves are green", when brown leaves are painted green, may
       mean something false (if we are interested in natural colour as a
       sign of something) or something true (if we are merely interested in
       chromatic matters).
   (b) "The squash ball is round" may mean something true (as round is its
       normal shape) or something false (as it is currently in violent contact
       with the wall and so nearly hemispherical).

In each case, there are supposed to be two or more "readings" or "disam-
biguations" corresponding to different meanings. But the parts are not
relevantly ambiguous, and there is no relevant ambiguity in how they are put
together. Hence the various meanings are not determined by the meaning of the
parts and how they are combined. Hence a semantic theory could not derive
suitable properties for the compounds from suitable properties for their parts.
    Taking it for granted that the anti-compositionalist objector is right to say
that there is no relevant lexical or structural ambiguity, a defender of com-
positionality in the face of the counterexamples has various options, and I
shall consider just two of them.

6   Covert indexicality. Some alleged counterexamples display not ambigu-
     ity but different assignments to hidden indexical elements.
7   Unspecific meaning. The counterexamples confuse distinct "readings",
     that is, distinct meanings, with distinct ways in which one and the same
     meaning could be true.[5]

The drift of this essay is that option 7 has been given insufficient attention,

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5 This option has been applied to alleged ambiguities in sentences with more than one quan-
   tifier by, among others, Kempson and Cormack (1981). If their word "interpretation" can
   be read as "way of being true", their §6 provides a well-argued case for the kind of position
   I am applying to the different cases discussed here.

and that it is a good option to take with respect to most of the examples under consideration here. The main argument for favouring 7 is that alternative approaches along the lines of 6 require the determination of a value for the covert variable if understanding is to be possible, and this does not seem to accord with the facts. This establishes at best that 7 is sometimes the best strategy for the compositionalist, but it does not speak to other cases, and does not address the question whether we are somehow committed to finding some successful compositionalist strategy.

4 Applying the strategies

4.1 Adjectival modification

The objector seems to me right to present cases like 1a and b as ones in which it is very implausible to attribute either lexical or structural ambiguity. First, there are apparently endless ways in which something can count as an Italian book, not all of which could be foreseen in advance in learning "Italian" or "book" or the construction of adjectival modification. If the word is learnt in a context in which the learner appreciates that the contextually salient way for something to be Italian is to be made in Italy, then an ambiguity account would suggest that this is the meaning learnt. It would then be hard to explain the ease with which people go on to use "Italian" in contexts in which other ways of being Italian are salient. Second, if these cases were to be explained by lexical or structural ambiguity, the ambiguity should be variable in cases in which it plainly is not. For example, if there were some fixed meaning of the construction which relates what "book" refers to with an intended trip to the place referred to by the noun ("Italy") which corresponds to the adjective, then "generous book" should have a reading (although perhaps one hard to access in normal contexts) on which it refers to a book in the pile to take to generosity. This is not a hard to access reading, but an absurdity.

If these cases are genuinely ambiguous, the ambiguity is pragmatic, as opposed to lexical or structural. In most contexts hearers will identify the intended relation between "Italian" and "book"; the identification will draw on context, and will exploit considerations of plausibility and relevance. In the present discussion, the question is whether pragmatic ambiguity arising from covert indexicality can provide an adequate account.

On the covert indexical theory, the logical form of "Italian book" could be represented by something like "Italian R book", where the interpretation of the relation variable R is to be supplied by the context. The form "xRy" could be interpreted so as to be true of the satisfiers of y which are written in a language which satisfied x, or so as to be true of the satisfiers of y manufactured in a place which satisfied the noun from which x is formed, and so on. The account has the advantage over accounts in terms of lexical or

structural ambiguity of not requiring that the various readings of the construction be settled in advance. Moreover, context can point to sensible interpretations of *R*, and can place obstacles in the way of accessing interpretations which, in other contexts, would be natural. However, unless nothing better can be found, it seems an extraordinary account as applied to this kind of case. It implies that you would not have understood an utterance like "Let's read an Italian book together" unless you had identified such an *R*; whereas in fact it seems you do understand even when you are in doubt about *R*. You may go on to ask "Do you mean a book in Italian or a book about Italy?", but this no more shows that you did not understand the first remark than if, in response to "Let's go to the movies" you say "Do you mean let's got tonight or later?". In both cases, the proposal was fully intelligible but not fully specific.

   Another difficulty for the covert indexical account is that once context has made one determination of the variable salient, it should remain salient throughout the sentence unless there are contrary indications, and a shift would produce a special zeugmatic effect. For example, it would be odd to say

   8   It's foggy; cold too

in the hope that context would determine different places for fog and cold, making 8 in effect equivalent to:

   9   It's foggy – here in London; cold too – there in Iceland.

However, there's at least no firm intuition that there is something off about the following shift:

   10   This is an Italian book – it's by Ginzburg; and this is another Italian one – it's in the Lonely Planet series and has lots of information about Italy.

An alternative to the covert indexicality account is to say that "Italian" functions just as one would expect from a dictionary entry: "Italian *F*" is satisfied by a satisfier of *F* of or pertaining to Italy. This is an unspecific but definite, unambiguous and complete meaning. An Italian book is one of or pertaining to Italy, and a book may pertain to Italy by being on my pile of books to take there, or by being about Italy, or by being manufactured in Italy, or by being written in the dominant language of Italy. The different so-called readings of a sentence like "Let's read an Italian book" do not correspond to different senses or meanings, but to different ways in which "we read an Italian book" can be made true: by reading a book written in Italian or a book about Italy or a book from my pile of books to take to Italy. It is no more correct to

regard this as ambiguity than to regard "John runs" as ambiguous on the grounds that it could be made true by John running in bare feet or in trainers, quickly or slowly, east or west

It seems to me hard to deny (a) that we should distinguish different "readings" of a sentence from different ways in which it could be made true and (b) that this distinction has not always been scrupulously adhered to. There is plenty of scope for detailed disagreement about precisely how the distinction divides the cases. In order to promote the claims of unspecific but determinate and unambiguous meanings, I will show, quickly and rather dogmatically, how the idea applies to various other cases.

"Feline care" is satisfied, in the same sense though not the same way, by a vet tending a cat and by a cat tending the puppy to which she is acting as foster mother. Both vet and cat supply care of or pertaining to felines, the vet by supplying care for a feline, the cat by being a feline which supplies care.

4.2 Genitives

I claim these are similar: their meanings are highly unspecific, and cover a range of cases. John's leg or table is a leg or table of or pertaining to John, which a leg or table may be in various ways. There are many different ways in which "John's leg is on his table" may be true, but the different ways are ways in which the same meaning can be true.

Here is an argument for an alternative account in terms of covert indexicality:

> Understanding a singular noun phrase like "John's table" involves identifying the object to which it refers, but one cannot do this until one knows what relation is supposed to link John to a table. The alleged unspecific meaning is not something that can be understood. On the covert indexicality theory, however, a full understanding requires that the relevant relation be identified, and this will lead to the identification of the relevant object, and without this identification the utterance cannot be understood.

The first premise is questionable. Perhaps one identifies something only by connecting it with antecedently possessed singular information relating to it. In that case, identification is not a prerequisite for understanding: definite descriptions can be understood even if they fail to denote, or if they do denote but the denoted object is unfamiliar to the understander. If the relevant notion of identification is weakened, perhaps to "one identifies an object, as the supposed referent of a noun phrase, only if one can give a satisfactory answer to the question 'to which object was the speaker, by using that phrase, purporting to refer?'" then it is unclear that a non-parrot-like rep-

etition of "John's table" is an unsatisfactory answer. If the standards of what is satisfactory are raised, genuine cases of understanding will be misclassified as cases in which there is no understanding.

A further consideration favouring unspecific meaning over covert indexicality is that one can mix different possessive relations without incongruity:

11   This is indeed my book [sc. the one I wrote], but it's yours now [sc. belongs to you].[6]

4.3 Compounded nouns

On the unspecific account, the determinate meaning does not supply specific information about how the satisfiers of the nouns are related. If we know that a carpet cleaner cleans carpets whereas a vacuum cleaner cleans using a (partial) vacuum, or that traffic lights control rather than illuminate traffic, or that a band saw does not saw bands but saws with a band, this is not semantic knowledge, but non-semantic knowledge, concerning cleaners, traffic and saws, knowledge of which of the ways for an unspecific content to be true is most likely to be in question. No doubt there are or could be traffic lights which illuminate traffic, cleaning machines which use carpets as flails to clean, and saws designed specially for sawing bands.

In defence of this approach, consider a more complex case. A chemical purifier factory may be a factory that makes chemical purifiers, or one that uses chemical purifiers in making something else. Each of these two possibilities divides into two, for a chemical purifier may purify a chemical or purify by using a chemical. So there are (at least) four possibilities for chemical purifier factories. On a covert indexical view of compounded nouns, a context in which "A chemical purifier factory is to be built at the end of your garden" is intelligible is one which selects just one out of (a minimum of) four possibilities, and understanding the utterance involves knowing which was selected. This seems a highly implausible view. Once you learn that a chemical purifier factory is to be built at the end of your garden, you know enough to start making a fuss and writing to your MP without needing to know exactly what form the horror will take. Unspecific meaning seems just the right account.

Suppose that context somehow makes salient the pair of relations <using, making>, so that, according to a convert indexicality view, an utterance of "A chemical purifier factory is to be built at the end of your garden" in that context is true iff a factory which makes things which are used to purify a

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6   There is also a shift from type to token.

chemical is to be built at the end of your garden. Suppose that in fact what is to be built at the end of your garden is a factory which makes things which purify by using a chemical. It seems to me nonetheless true that a chemical purifier factory is to be built at the end of your garden: this is inconsistent with a covert indexical account.

4.4 Verbs

There probably is a transitive/non-transitive ambiguity in many verbs, including "runs" and "smokes". Within non-transitive running, there are many kinds, as illustrated in 4(a). Many will typically be hard to access in a context. Perhaps some ways are excluded by restrictions relating to semantic categories. But we should not be too swift to think we know the exclusions. A recent cost-reducing innovation in the undertaking business involves chemically liquefying the corpses and running them into the public drains. John, once dead and in the grip of the innovators, can run like warm butter. There is no need to recognize semantic (as opposed to business) innovation here, or any change of meaning.

4(b) illustrates transitive/non-transitive ambiguity in "smokes", and so does not as such pose a threat to the compositionalist. Within the transitive use it is surprising how unspecific the meaning turns out to be, as the following puzzle illustrates: how can a cigarette be half-smoked without being shorter than before? To smoke a cigarette you normally put one end in your mouth, light the other, and puff. To smoke a salmon, you normally soak it in brine for one and a half hours, hang it in your chimney, and when it is dry light little piles of oak chips at the bottom of the chimney and leave it for eight hours. There are different ways of smoking, but no ambiguity in the word "smoke". You *could* smoke a cigarette by soaking it in brine for one and a half hours, hanging it in your chimney, and when it is dry lighting little piles of oak chips at the bottom of the chimney. Then half-smoking a cigarette, smoking it for a mere four hours, may not shrink it much or at all. This way of smoking cigarettes is much better for your health than the normal one. Trying to smoke a salmon in the way cigarettes are usually smoked is unlikely to be successful; this shows that one understands what it would be to try this, and reinforces the claim that there is no relevant ambiguity in "smoke".

4.5 The Travis effect

This can suggest some radical conclusions about the nature of language, of which failure of compositionality is at the conservative end of the spectrum. I believe that at least some of these cases can be dealt with by seeing meanings as suitably unspecific, though other cases are best described in terms of covert indexicality (and perhaps yet other cases are

genuine counterexamples to compositionality). I start by elaborating the examples a little.[7]

5(a) "Those leaves are green." Brown leaves have been painted green. Suppose we are part of a commission inspecting Vietnam to determine whether Pentagon denials that it has used defoliants are true. Brown leaves are signs of the early stages of the action of defoliants. Travis suggests that, in this context, the truth about the painted leaves is that they are not green. The sentence has a meaning such that the facts just described make it false. Now suppose that we are trying to select camouflage material. Only green things will do, and more or less anything green will do. In this context, Travis suggests, the truth about the very same leaves is that they are green. The sentence has a meaning such that the same leaf-related facts make it false. Yet the sentence is not ambiguous, so it has only one meaning, it relates only to the leaves and the leaves are in the same state in both circumstances. This seems like a contradiction. Travis avoids it by denying that there is a proper conception of meaning which determines the truth conditions of what is said on an occasion (even allowing for the kind of context sensitivity manifested by pronouns).

I suggest that "Those leaves are green" is true in both cases, but that in the first a participant who came to learn that it is true would jump to the conclusion that it is made true in the normal way, rather than the exceptional way. This participant would be led astray; but one can easily be led astray by the truth (as by Desdemona's handkerchief). The meaning of "green" is unspecific: there must be a green surface, but the meaning is indifferent to how deep the colour runs and how the surface got to be that colour. We generally make normal assumptions about these things, just as we assume that "John smokes" is true in virtue of John smoking cigarettes or cigars or a pipe, rather than in virtue of frequently smoking salmon. But we have no difficulty in seeing that these normal assumptions may fail to hold.

5(b) "The ball is round." A first time spectator at a squash game asks if the ball is round. He wants to know whether squash resembles soccer, in being played with a round ball, or rugger, in being played with a ball which is not round. The right answer to the question is "Yes", even if the ball is currently far from round thanks to having been hit against the wall.

In a contrasting case, a manufacturer of squash balls is trying out a new material. For the trials, tiny transmitters have been inserted into the skin of the ball to measure reactions to deformations. The instrument adjacent to the court, which is supposed to register the signals, is flat, which is as it should be if the ball is not at that moment deformed. The technician asks if the ball is

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7 Sources are Travis (1985, 1994, 1996). Travis (1994) in effect denies compositionality for utterances or thoughts, on the grounds that many pragmatic determinations operate differently from those at work in determining reference for indexicals.

round. If the ball is at that point ovid through being against the wall, the right answer is "No".

In these cases, I find it hard not to accept Travis's judgements of truth value, and this marks a difference from the other cases we have considered. For example, it was claimed that "Italian book" is ambiguous; but it was not explicitly claimed that "That's an Italian book" could be both true and false of the same book, depending on which meaning is selected in the context. Had this claim been made, I would have rejected it.[8] But in the present case I find myself compelled to agree that "The ball is round" is made both true and false by the same ball in the same condition, depending on the context. This rules out the account in terms of unspecific meaning, for within the classical perspective which I accept, but which Travis is trying to undermine, an utterance with a single meaning, however unspecific, cannot be made to have opposite truth values by the same facts.

This leaves three options: either this is a failure of compositionality, or there is some lexical or structural ambiguity we have not yet considered, or there is a hidden contextual variable taking different values in the different cases. I offer a sketchy development of the last option.

Perhaps the present tense introduces a covert indexical for a stretch of time. An utterance containing "is ϕ" has as logical form "is ϕ for at least t" where the variable over temporal intervals is contextually determined (or determined in part by context and in part by the semantic character of ϕ). Polar values for this variable are *at this very moment*, and *in a general way*. John is writhing in the dentist's chair. Is he happy? Not right now; but he is in a general way. Each of these values is probably also vague.

The two squash ball utterances pick up different values for t as a function in part of the concerns and interests of the participants. Hence the interpreted utterances say different things; and so, by one standard, differ in meaning. There is no counterexample to compositionality, any more than there is (or so we are supposing for the sake of the present discussion) in the fact that "Elle a faim" can be used to say different things.

5 Conclusion

While it can hardly be doubted that some measure of compositionality of understanding of utterances obtains, there is no apriori guarantee that it is universal. Even the staunchest defenders of compositionality admit this in their recognition of "idiom": you cannot derive the standard colloquial meaning of "kicked the bucket" from a proper specification of the meaning

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8 One can hear an utterance of these words as both true and false if one supplies different implicit qualifications, but such a case is merely like "Clinton is good (as a statesman) and not good (as a husband).

of its parts. So we are left with a somewhat messy question: how far do these failures extend? In this paper I have considered some reasonably common *kinds* of apparent failure: locutions widespread enough that if compositionality failed for them, the claimed general compositionality for English would require serious qualification.

The counterexamples have taken the form of expressions which allegedly have different meanings or readings, even though there is no relevant lexical or structural ambiguity among their parts. In most cases, there are very many ways in which utterances containing the expressions could be true, and sometimes there seems no way of containing or listing all possibilities in advance. This tends to reduce the attractiveness of attempts to find some hidden lexical or structural ambiguity, for lexical and structural meanings must be fixed and known in advance. Approaches in terms of covert indexicality provide an appropriate kind of flexibility, but they suffer the defect that they predict that an utterance cannot be understood unless a specific value is assigned to the hidden variable, and in many cases this seems at variance with the facts. The claim that meaning is often unspecific deals well with a number of cases, though it cannot handle ones in which we are convinced that the utterances of the same sentence with the same reference for all explicit elements can have opposite truth values, as a function of context. In such cases, the most plausible option for the compositionalist, unless ambiguity can be detected in the components, is a covert indexicality view.

The issue of the extent to which our language is compositional is not to be decided by general apriori reasoning, but by detailed examination of specific cases, and careful attention to the methodology of various possible descriptions of them . . .[9]