Meaning, Possibility, and the Non-finite Architecture of Language

The aim of the project is to better understand natural language and meaning, as well as theories of meaning. In particular, it seeks to develop our picture of possibility in language – focusing on possible sentences and possible words. It presents a unique approach to each type of possibility, and then pushes them to their extremes. For possible sentences, the project looks to develop a way of compounding sentences to explore increasingly complicated sentences. Though these sentences can grow to be very long and complex, they continue to be perfectly correct sentences. There appears to be an indefinite number of such sentences available in a given natural language. For possible words, the project examines the ways in which new words enter the language. It attempts to focus in on what meanings can be attributed to a single word, and suggests that an indefinite number of new words and meanings can enter the vocabulary of a language.

These phenomena are rather plain in and of themselves, however, they prove to be interesting when put into the context of different theories of meaning. There are theories of meaning that privilege complex expressions like sentences, and there are also theories of meaning that instead privilege simple expressions like words. The way that possibility works with possible sentences can be used to expose problems in those theories that favor complex expressions, and the analysis of possible words can weaken theories that prefer to operate on simple expressions. These issues highlight the importance of possibility as a structural feature of language. Insofar as these theories fail, it is because they do not take into account these unusual though entirely possible aspects of language. Hence, the aim of the project is a better understanding of natural language, meaning, and theories of meaning in light of theoretical possibility – something that theories of meaning must respect, if they are really theories to begin with.

The research plan of the project involves a broad analysis of current theories of meaning and literature on the relevant areas of language. Through a detailed examination of the tenets and machinery of these theories, thought experiments, rational reconstructions, and logical investigations can be carried out. The primary motivation for the endeavor is a matter of correcting the path that treatments of language have been following for some time, as they appear to have neglected this important element. If the reconstructions and the criticisms the project puts forward succeed, they promise to introduce a new measure for theories of meaning in the future – one that spans different frameworks, with standalone import, and which can prove fruitful to other endeavors in language.