

Advancing the State of the Art: The Ontology of Words and Hypothetical Expressions

The ontology of words is an area of research investigating the nature of simple expressions. In particular, it explores how we should conceptualize words as objects or entities, whether as abstract types, concrete particulars, or something altogether different. The aim of this project is to advance that field by introducing a comprehensive account of words as elements of natural language, an extension of that account into hypothetical expressions, and ultimately the introduction of possible words. Hypothetical expressions are simply words that are form and meaning pairs that are not part of the language, but which are consistent with a given account of words. Hypothetical words present interesting cases from the perspective of ontology, in that they bring forward more complicated intuitions involving things like our capacity to introduce novel expressions to the language and the notion of purely possible objects.

The project stands to advance the state of the art by introducing a much-needed comprehensive account of words for the field to operate with. That aspect of the project rests largely with the introduction of supporting research from linguistics, which offers considerable resources tailored to the task of defining words and so of establishing a baseline account for the ontology of words. It also stands to advance the state of the art by introducing possibility as an altogether novel perspective. The advancement consists in breaking with the current trends in this research stream by moving away from actuality to possibility. That move to possibility promises to further our understanding of words and to provide a new way of looking at the current positions on offer, as well as creating the conceptual space necessary to introduce more unorthodox ontological frameworks that may prove more able to adequately capture natural language.

The results of this endeavor will help to integrate linguistics and philosophy of language through the ontology of words. Advancing our way of thinking of what words are is a considerable foundational matter in how we approach research in natural language broadly speaking, and underlies much of the more tangible work taking place in theoretical grammars, natural language processing, and related research streams. More generally, exploring these fundamental aspects of natural language is an inherently significant endeavor in itself, given the place of language in our world.