

Linguistic Intuition and Reductionism: Comments on Katz's Paper

ESA SAARINEN

In his paper "Common sense in semantics" Katz claims that his approach to semantics is "unique among approaches to the subject in the philosophy of language, linguistics, and logic" (p. 174). Katz tells us that what renders his approach unique is, firstly, that his theory is not "reductionistic" and, secondly, that on his approach "meanings are taken as they present themselves in our ordinary experience with natural language" (p. 174). I shall discuss separately each of these alleged differences between Katz's approaches and other approaches.

Katz on linguistic intuition According to Katz, his approach is "distinctive in accepting the commonsense notion of meaning as the proper object of study in semantics" (p. 180). He wants to claim that "there is a particular way in which senses or meanings present themselves to us [and that] knowledge of this way is a matter of common sense" (pp. 174-175). Pretheoretic, linguistic common sense or intuition is "both our initial source and final arbiter" (p. 179). It supplies the data, it provides the facts, and all that remains for the theorist to do is to codify, systematize, or formalize these pretheoretically given facts. In this sense, the pretheoretically given intuitive facts are strictly prior to all theoretization; no feedback from the latter to the former is allowed. Thus there is a well-defined subject matter of semantics which provides the firm foundation for the theoretician's efforts. Furthermore, the subject matter is absolute, incorrigible, and undefeatable by any theoretical considerations. The intuitive facts supplied by 'linguistic common sense' "are as certain as the propositions on G. E. Moore's list in 'A Defense of Common Sense'" (p. 175). "In irreconcilable conflicts with clear intuition, it is always the nonintuitional source of evidence that goes" (p. 178).

These are strong methodological claims. Below, I shall argue that Katz's