

JON BARWISE'S PAPERS ON NATURAL LANGUAGE SEMANTICS

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§1. Introduction. For most of the 1980s, Jon Barwise focused much of his research in the area of natural language semantics. This article surveys his research publications in that area.

Most, but not all, of those publications were in the area of situation semantics, a new approach to natural language semantics Barwise developed jointly with his colleague John Perry in the first half of the 1980s. That work was both blessed, and cursed, by becoming closely identified in academic circles with the award of a \$23 million gift to Stanford from the System Development Foundation for the establishment in 1983 of its Center for the Study of Language and Information (CSLI). The development of situation semantics, and in due course its underlying mathematical foundation Situation Theory, carried out for the most part within the framework of CSLI's STASS research group (Situation Theory and Situation Semantics), was actually a relatively small part of the overall research program at CSLI. But because Barwise and Perry were leading figures at CSLI, were centrally involved in securing the SDF gift, and were respectively the first and second directors of CSLI, a general impression sprung up that the two of them had been awarded millions of dollars to develop situation semantics.

A major consequence of this false impression was that from the theory's early days, a great deal of interest was shown in the project. With so many accomplished scholars pouring over the work while the ink was still wet on the manuscript pages, Barwise and Perry were able to take advantage of a broad range of helpful criticism (even if it was not always given with a view to being helpful). This meant that they were able to develop the new theory much more rapidly than would otherwise have been the case.

But the false impression about the funding was as much a curse as a blessing, maybe more so. First, it created totally unrealistic expectations as to what the situation semantics could achieve, and what it could achieve in a short time.

Second, the rapid rate of adjustments and changes Barwise and Perry made to the theory in response to the many critiques gave rise to an equally

Received November 16, 2003; accepted December 1, 2003.

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1079-8986/04/1001-0005/\$4.20