Moderate Holism as an Explanation for Linguistic Phenomena

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Abstract : Traditionally meaning holism is a theory that is related to the meaning attributed to words and their relationships to other words in a language. This theory can be more specifically defined as a defense of the mutual interdependence of all items of linguistic knowledge, so that, for example, to understand the meaning of a given expression, it is necessary to understand a large sector of the language in question or, even the complete language. The aim of this paper is to present a moderate version of meaning holism, which argues that, among other things, meaning holism does not imply the thesis of instability - if there is the change of belief about an object, there is a change of meaning - and, in this way, it is possible to attribute meanings to objects admitting changes of opinions and then beliefs. It will be shown how this version of holism gives an account of the main criticisms made of meaning holism in the last decades and also show how this theory can justify linguistic phenomena (like vagueness and polysemy) that are often treated as problems of language. Finally, it will also be argued that these linguistic phenomena are intrinsic to languages and that the moderate version of meaning holism can justify the occurrence of these phenomena.

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