Introduction to *Discourse, Structure and Linguistic Choice* by T. Price Caldwell

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Introduction

I have become a pluralist, something like a non-rigorous existentialist; I believe in essences, but I think they come from the ground, not from the sky. The problem with categorical thinking is that it requires generalizing. If you generalize habitually, everything begins to looks like everything else. After a while, everything is the same category or set of categories, and it looks like there is only one essence. In this direction lies monotheism and every kind of monism. Going too far in this direction is a bad habit of Western thought. Sufficiently particularized, however, nothing looks like anything else (T. Price Caldwell)

Preliminary Personal Remarks

Thomas Price Caldwell, known universally as Price, was born in Tutwiler, Mississippi. He earned his Ph.D. at Tulane, on Wallace Stevens, and taught for many years at Mississippi State University. He was also regularly a Visiting Professor of English at Meisei University, Tokyo.

Caldwell began his career in letters as a poet, short-story writer and literary theorist. In the late 1980s, however, he turned his attention in a concerted way to the intersection of linguistic semantics, semiotic theory and philosophy of language. Doing so, he found himself dissatisfied with the inapplicability of much of the work he encountered there, including in particular its inapplicability to literary interpretation and pedagogy. He thus began to pursue his own very original approach to discourses and their meaning. He christened it Molecular Sememics.

It was around this time that Caldwell and I first interacted. We exchanged ideas online, in lengthy e-mail exchanges. I provided comments on his drafts, often defending the linguistico-philosophical orthodoxy; he provided comments on my drafts, often underscoring hidden assumptions which he rightly found non-obvious. Our correspondence went on for at least a year before we finally met in person.

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1 I am grateful to Justina Diaz Legaspe, Julia Lei, Jiangtian Li, Chang Liu, Louise McNally and Peter Shillingsburg for helpful comments on a previous draft.
(Sadly, that happened only once, around 1991 – at a clambake in Rhode Island!) It continued thereafter, but eventually our exchanges became less frequent.

Caldwell worked on molecular sememics for the rest of his scholarly career, completing various stand-alone draft papers. He did not formally publish any of these contributions, however: at most, they appeared as working papers from Meisei’s internal series. That is because he planned to publish his views in one cohesive monograph.

That monograph never came to fruition in his lifetime. He was diagnosed with leukaemia, and became too unwell to continue the work. Not long before his untimely death in February of 2015, Caldwell reached out to me as an old friend and sympathetic ear. He hoped that I could make his ideas available to the larger academic community, and appointed me his Literary Executor. This book, co-edited with my one-time graduate student Oliver Cresswell, is the result.

Two kinds of material are presented here. On the one hand, there are the aforementioned articles, which required little editorial oversight. They were nearly publication-ready. These eight stand-alone papers together highlight the pieces of the overarching view that Caldwell had been working towards, both in terms of the theory and its applications. On the other hand, there is an unfinished monograph, which carried the working title *Molecular Sememics*. It ties many of those pieces together. We have, of necessity, modified it more extensively.

Though the articles and the book draft overlap significantly, we editors opted to co-publish both as a more complete guide to Caldwell’s ideas. To most effectively present them, we have opted to order the materials out of chronological order. The volume begins with two chapters on motivation, methodology and the overarching theory of meaning. The next two chapters offer specific proposals within that larger theory. Next is the unfinished monograph, in five sections, which reiterates in a synthetic way some of what comes before, as well as adding new ideas. The volume ends with concerns that were at the heart of Caldwell’s academic life: applications to creative writing, to criticism and to pedagogy.

Before moving ahead, two important caveats should be issued. The introductory overview which follows will make clear, I hope, why we find the work of great value: it is highly original and insightful in terms of its motivation, methodology and views about linguistic meaning and its origins. What’s more, concerns about applicability to literary interpretation, teaching and ordinary talk are at the forefront. That said, though it would have been a great shame for Caldwell’s ideas to have remained inaccessible to the larger linguistic and philosophical community, he achieves such originality precisely by coming at things as an outsider not ‘raised’ in any of the twentieth-century orthodoxies. The first caveat, then, pertains to suggestions for how to approach the writings published here. First and foremost, readers should come to the papers and the draft monograph with an open mind, in the spirit of taking away ideas. Read them, that is, as putting novel options on the table, available for scrutiny and potential development. If Caldwell writes something which
seems naive, overlook the naiveté; better still, pause to wonder whether what seems so obvious to us, ‘the enlightened’, really is so clearly the case. Continuing with this first caveat: understand the criticism of others in the spirit in which, I know from personal exchanges, Caldwell meant them. He was not one for negative polemics: his expository technique was to clarify his own positive views, by sharply contrasting them with broad-strokes approaches his readers would be much more conversant with. His point was: ‘This is the sort of thing I am rejecting, for the following reasons’. This second suggestion is essential because, if one reads him as aiming for negative results, Caldwell’s criticisms clearly miss their mark. To mention two salient examples, he pretty seriously misreads Chomsky and Pinker. He seemingly takes Chomsky to be attempting to provide a theory of the meaning of speech, wherein formally specified competence yields performance-level content – with Caldwell offering up a sharply contrasting account of speech act content (p. 67). In Chap. 3, he seemingly takes Pinker to be denying that one’s native language can impact upon personal-level gestalt perception of ordinary items in our ‘life world’ – with Caldwell providing a sharply contrasting account of such perception. Old hands will know that these were not Chomsky’s or Pinker’s projects. My suggestion, then, is to emphasize Caldwell’s contrasting positive accounts, not his seeming critiques. A third and related suggestion: as hinted already, Caldwell paints opposing views with a very broad brush, e.g., collapsing a very motley grouping of theorists, often at war with one another, as ‘formalists’. Once again, however, a reader will extract the most from what follows by placing the emphasis on how Caldwell is at odds with even such a heterogeneous collection of theorists.

The second caveat is about my exposition, rather than about how to read Caldwell’s texts. Though indeed an old friend and a sympathetic ear, Caldwell’s views remain radically different from my own. What’s more, many of the concepts I deploy below to explicate his views in more familiar jargon live in the very tradition that Caldwell was most forcefully reacting against. It’s inevitable, then, that I will misrepresent him. Read me, then, as offering a first-pass and oversimplified point of departure. (One should also, of course, read what follows as sensitively explaining a view, not endorsing it.) My hope is that future careful exegesis, by those coming from a range of backgrounds, will reveal subtleties and alternative readings not captured in the present Introduction.

The reminder of this Introduction is divided into three parts. I begin, in the immediately following section, by presenting Caldwell’s overarching approach to language: its methodological precepts and its broad-strokes substantive commitments. I do so, in particular, by overviewing his reactions against dominant alternatives, and by sketching his innovative melding of themes which will be vaguely familiar to Structuralists and Functionalists. In the next section, I consider Caldwell’s views on meaning in particular, introducing his crucial notion of the molecular sememe. Finally, in Sect. 4, I draw attention to some applications of his ideas.
Caldwell and ‘Moderate Structuralism’

The best entryway into Caldwell’s positive overarching view is to sketch in briefest outline three ‘immoderate’ views (to use a label of my own devising) which he adamantly rejects.

The first, which Caldwell constantly returns to as the wrong approach, I will label Radical Structuralism. It takes language to be wholly abstract, with static, fixed, simple and exceptionless rules. A language, so understood, is an all-encompassing coding system which is human-independent: to deploy Hjelmslev’s terminology, it has a preset and wholly universal ‘content-plane’ and a humanly universal ‘expression plane’. What’s more, a language all on its own yields determinate meaning facts for utterances, and even a guarantee of correct interpretation. Though obviously an extreme, Caldwell takes this position to be vaguely consonant with Saussure/Hjelmslev/Jakobson, but also with Chomsky and the tradition of generative grammar.

The second extreme position, also to be rejected, is Radical Empiricism. It takes languages to be nothing more than concrete linguistic happenings, and it is contented to find messy inductive generalizations about a small group of speakers. This position is meant to be reminiscent of Bloomfield.

The final extreme which Caldwell considers, and which I will call Meaning Nihilism, involves the complete abandonment of both Structuralism’s abstract rules and the detailed ground-level description of utterances as produced by small groups. The abandonment, that is, of logico-scientific theorizing about meaning of any kind. This is allegedly justified because, according to this third extreme, there are no stable meanings to be found, and no rules at all; instead, talk approaches irrational anarchy, with ‘nothing hidden’. (Caldwell connects this radical view with Derrida’s Deconstructionism, but he could equally have pointed to Donald Davidson’s ‘A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs’ from 1986 or the panoply of anti-theory Wittgensteinians.)

What is wrong with this triumvirate of options? For Caldwell, the second approach correctly emphasizes actual in-context talk and recognizes that linguistic facts flow ‘bottom up’. Still, it goes too far because it aims excessively low in terms of goals; and, relatedly, the level of abstraction from actual token discourses which it can manage is insufficient. Put otherwise, while Radical Structuralism is, for Caldwell, unduly ‘theory-driven’, Radical Empiricism is unduly ‘data driven’. One obvious fault with the final extreme is that it aims far, far too low. Caldwell seems to have thought, moreover, that one can be brought to aim this low by failing to recognize twin aids to theoretical success: (i) adjacent non-linguistic semiotic systems, which can help overcome narrowly linguistic indeterminacy; and (ii) what can ‘go without saying’ because of our peculiar human biology and psychology. (I will return to this theme in Sect. 4.) The issue of what is wrong with Radical Structuralism deserves much more attention – because, of the three options, Caldwell is most drawn to the Structuralist one. He thinks, indeed, that Structuralism had once been on the right track.
I would divide Caldwell’s objections to Radical Structuralism into two families: he takes issue both with its search for universal, precise, exceptionless rules, and with the (related) detachment of linguistic theorizing from actual human cognition and talk. As Caldwell sees it, not only does it seek out explicit rules when in fact ordinary language just isn’t that kind of system – language being fuzzy, vague and a matter of family resemblances – but Radical Structuralism pursues a fully global system. It tries to apply the notions of structure and differences to a language as a whole, which entails that one must give the meaning of any one word in terms of all others. Instead, holds Caldwell, the contrasts are not all of those in principle available, but only the (less-than-fully-global) reasonable ones. As he writes: ‘words find their meanings not by contrast to every other word in the lexicon, but only by contrast to the other words in the molecule, all of which have been chosen by one particular discourse’ (p. 39).

Upon failing repeatedly, as she inevitably will, to find explicit necessary and sufficient conditions, especially ones which apply universally, the Radical Structuralist may pursue two different but equally unhappy paths. She may endlessly complicate the rules, to keep them precise and exceptionless. Or she may ‘abstract away’ from the continual exceptions to some imagined and ideal ‘core’. This latter path takes us to the second family of objections.

In order to overcome bothersome ‘complexities’, Caldwell takes Radical Structuralism to standardly opt for downplaying actual speech. It was satisfied with finding its structure and its differences/contrasts in a highly abstract construct, one divorced from speech episodes. A related objection is that it also downplayed actual human mentation. Caldwell takes the study of signs in general, and of linguistic ones in particular, to be intimately connected specifically to human cognition. Yes there is a semiotic ‘system’, yes it is trans-individual; but it goes too far to stress these until the individual’s psychological processing gets entirely lost – another ‘divorce’. More radically, he insists upon a very crucial and much neglected point, namely that human beings are clever. Even those like Chomsky, who highlight the psychological within their linguistic theorizing, focus on one kind of cognitive creativity, namely the kind afforded by algorithms whose implementation requires no intelligence or insight whatever. Speakers, however, are creative in an additional and very different sense, namely astute, original, able to deal dynamically with novel situations, etc. Put otherwise, in one of the deepest philosophical observations ever made to me, and reminiscent of certain Cognitive Linguists, Caldwell insisted that it is a mistake to take as a constraint on ‘rules of language’ that a mindless machine should be able to apply them. After all, he said, people are smart.

Caldwell also faults Radical Structuralism for exaggerating the arbitrariness of language. Granted, there isn’t any resemblance between the sound /chi-k’n/ and chickens; granted too, different languages pair different linguistic sounds-patterns with gallus gallus domesticus. That sub-variety of arbitrariness is genuine. But if we keep prior discourse firmly in mind, we find that linguistic arbitrariness is not ubiquitous and all-encompassing. For instance, discourse is ‘coercive’ in pushing certain meaning choices over others. He frequently recurs to (1) as an example:
1. Let’s put the voltmeter on the starter solenoid and see if it’s getting any __

There are indeed a number of options here: ‘electricity’, ‘voltage’, ‘power’, ‘juice’. But there is a limit to the options, with ‘chicken’ and ‘surrealism’ being clearly ruled out. What’s more, the discourse situation may seemingly cry out for ‘electricity’ in a way that would make ‘juice’ highly marked. Revisiting the point about the importance of specifically human cognition, there is also a naturalness to the differences in play, given what we perceive, as embodied human agents living on this planet. In a similar vein, Radical Structuralism overemphasizes the synchronic over the diachronic. This is a final kind of ‘divorce’, this time from evolutionary pressures specific to us and our world. In sum, arbitrariness looms unduly large if we dissociate the theory of language from a series of important situational facts.

Before turning to Caldwell’s positive alternative, I want to connect these criticisms to his scholarly background. This will be a motif which recurs throughout the remainder of this Introduction. As I said above, Caldwell came to the theory of meaning from a background in the creation and interpretation of literary works. He also came to it with the outlook of a career as a Professor of English. Structuralism, pushed to the above extreme, becomes inapplicable to literary texts and affords no insight into pedagogy. Thus the resulting position is not merely implausible with respect to our ordinary talk; in addition, the High Church version fails to address Caldwell’s particular academic interests.

Radical Structural turns out, as we have seen, to be problematic on ever so many fronts. Nonetheless, Caldwell based his positive view on insights from Saussure, Jakobson et al. How so? As I reconstruct his overarching view, there are two crucial elements in Caldwell’s repair. On the one hand, he deploys five methodological precepts, each of which merits the label ‘moderate’. On the other, he shares important insights with Functionalists, including especially M.A.K. Halliday and Talmy Givon.

Implicit in his reactions against the triumvirate of foils above are methodological stances – ones which will guide Caldwell’s positive theorizing as well. To begin with, and consonant with his overarching pragmatism, Caldwell holds that language theorists should aim for an appropriately modest, achievable goal. For instance, they ought to retreat from the demand for explicit and inviolable ‘rules’ and ‘categories’, and rest content with conventionalized uses and ‘strategies for communicating’ (p. 126). That is, at least sometimes, it is enough to uncover vagueness, analogies, heuristics and family resemblance, as opposed to exceptionless criteria. (This is not, of course, to concede that conversation is so much pandemonium.) Or again, Caldwell doubts that meaning theorists will uncover a collection of universal contrastive meaning-features, as was achieved in Structuralist phonology with respect to articulatory-features. He expects to find, when it comes to linguistic meanings, lots of ‘kludges’ and historical contingencies. However, he does not construe this as failing to achieve a laudable goal. He writes:

Normally when we think of structure, we mean some phenomenon whose organization has been dictated by a set of rules, or whose features are the manifestation of a set of rules. But this is not the only way, certainly not the only way in nature, and quite possibly not the only
way in language either. Language may well be more like biology than logic, more like a growing thing than a diagram or blueprint (p. 51).

A second, and closely related precept, is that theorists should aim for the right degree of abstraction. There are numerous instances of this which he mentions. As he stresses repeatedly, in finding the meaning of words, one mustn’t unduly abstract from the sentential context of the word; nor from the discourse context of the sentence. Equally, it is methodologically unhappy to abstract too much from actual talk, from ‘performances’; and from non-linguistic context, including the particular persons with particular mental states creating said performances. The rules of a language are context-sensitive rules. They are also, as he will stress repeatedly, dynamic. To seek out context-free and static rules for the sake of abstracting away from ‘noise’ is, therefore, to miss the essence of language. (The soul of linguistic interaction is practical meaning-making, and it is highly variable.) It is especially unhappy to set aside the various non-truth-apt uses of language: as if, for instance, the whole of talk consisted in scientific and philosophical discussions about ‘the facts’. Connected to all of these, but worthy of treatment as a precept of its own, is Caldwell’s insistence that theorists not detach the study of language wholly from our specifically human psychology (especially perception) or our human biology, nor from our actual world; nor should she approach natural language as autonomous from other systems of signs. For one thing, this would preclude ever understanding the origin and evolution of human language; for another, linguistics is but one sub-branch of semiotics for him, and all of semiotics is grounded in our embodied minds. The emphasis on actual talk and ‘groundedness’ leads directly to a fourth methodological commitment, namely to understanding the order of explanation as ‘bottom up’ rather than ‘top down’. Overly abstracting from the complexities of actual language production and comprehension is an especially serious methodological mistake because, holds Caldwell, these are the very sources of meaning. He takes specific interactions – rife with human intentions and situational circumstances – as fundamental. On the other hand, recalling the need for viable aims, the language theorist should go more local than the Radical Structuralist does. This is the final methodological precept. Caldwell does understand the attractions of holism, but radical holism leads to pessimism of the sort found in Radical Empiricism and in Nihilism, or to the unachievable goals of Radical Structuralism. That is, to anticipate an absolutely seminal idea, he would have the theorist opt not for the atom, nor for the whole of language, but for something in between: his molecules of meaning.

So much for the first key step in Caldwell’s move to a moderate Structuralism. The second involves folding in elements familiar from Functionalism. Caldwell retains from Saussure et al. the idea that structure is crucial: meanings are not to be located (solely?) in atoms but in complexes, in the relationships among various items. Connected to this is Saussure’s position that an essential element in meaning, both in spoken tongues and other semiotic systems, are differences/contrasts. Caldwell complements this, as do many Functionalists, with a central role for the
individual’s choice within a system of options. To borrow terminology from semiotic theory, Caldwell stresses not just syntagmatic but also paradigmatic relationships. Here is a simple example. Looking at (2), we find syntagmatic relationships among: the determiner ‘the’; the noun ‘cat’; the auxiliary verb ‘be’ in third person singular; the preposition ‘on’; etc. Comparing (2) to (3), we also find numerous paradigmatic relationships: ‘the’ versus ‘a’ in the determiner position; ‘cat’ versus ‘dog’ in the nominal position; present ‘is’ versus past ‘was’ as tense; ‘on’ versus ‘in’ as the preposition; and so on.

2. The cat is on the mat
3. A dog was in the car

Syntagmatic structure across a sentence’s parts is the focus of most contemporary syntax, though the mainstream would no longer speak in those terms. One attempts to identify the correct tree structure, and links among its constituents, for a given sentence (and, possibly, a larger tree for a discourse-level series of sentences and links across them). But what Caldwell insists upon is that there is also paradigmatic structure (constrained, of course, by the substitutional categories for each sentence part): at each syntagmatic location, a decision is made among the items which can occur there. (Note that the choice need not be among opposites: a cat is not the opposite of a dog, for instance.) Crucially, recognizing which items were not selected – though they were available as potential options – is part of knowing the meaning of the whole expression. Still echoing Functionalist themes, Caldwell constantly underscores the importance of discourse, and this in two senses. (See especially p. 42 ff.) On the one hand, identifying meaning in context requires knowing what kind of discourse the speech belongs to courtroom discourse, the discourse of baseball, a love poem, etc. He calls this discourse in the ‘large’ sense. On the other hand, identifying meaning requires recognition of context more broadly, both linguistic (e.g., the prior speech episodes) and non-linguistic (worldly circumstances, general and particular, the aims of the participants and so on). Related to the latter is the mass of information which ‘goes without saying’ for creatures with our biology, psychology and world-as-experienced. Finally, when trying to explain form/structure, Caldwell proposes that one should often reference function: form/structure is not self-standing, sui generis, but is rather driven by cognitive and communicative demands. (See, e.g., his discussion of the explanatory priority of discourse salience over English word-order in the final chapter.)

It may help underscore the foregoing lessons to rehearse an analogy and an example. The notions of structure, differences, choice, etc., can be clarified by elaborating on Caldwell’s own Saussure-inspired analogy of chess, pursued in some detail in Chap. 5. Consider both the pieces in chess and the moves one makes with them. What makes something a rook, say, is not its physical form: though typically

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2 Caldwell recognizes, indeed he stresses, that Saussure himself, in the early days, would have welcomed much of what follows: that is, Saussure began his theorizing as a moderate. However, as Caldwell tells the ‘potted history’, Structuralism latterly took things to a radical extreme, so that ‘reactionary’ repair is called for.
shaped like a castle tower, one cannot in general look at an item and determine whether it is a rook or not. There are ever so many extremely stylized ones. Rather, something is a rook if it plays a certain role in a chess set: it is the piece which occupies the extreme back corners of the board at the outset, beside the knights; it is the piece which can move forward and side-to-side, any number of squares, but always in a straight line; it is among the pieces which cannot jump over others; and so forth. Notice how, in explaining the nature of the rook, there is an emphasis both on structure and on difference: the role in the game as a whole, and the contrasting roles of other pieces. Turning to selection/choice, a good player understands the opponent’s move not just in terms of what piece she did move, and how, but in terms of what moves were open to her which she eschewed. That choice speaks volumes about the strategy she is pursuing in the game. The analogy to discourse, in both senses mentioned above, is this. In the ‘large’ sense of discourse, the expert player will recognize the kind of chess game which is underway: is this a Latvian Gambit; is the opponent trying to control the centre? Also essential, now comparable to the ‘small’ sense of discourse, are the specific moves which have come previously in this particular playing of the game.

To clarify still further our key elements, consider one of Caldwell’s go-to examples:

Some years ago, I attended graduation exercises at a small American university. During the course of the ceremonies, the university Registrar said, ‘This is undoubtedly the largest class we have ever graduated’. I began to wonder what the word ‘undoubtedly’ meant in this instance.

I thought that if he had said, simply, ‘This is the largest class we have ever graduated’ I would have taken it as a statement of documentary fact, coming from the authority charged with assembling such documentary information. Since he didn’t say that, I suspected that he didn’t know for sure – had forgotten to look at the actual numbers – and was guessing. But since he also did not say, ‘This is probably (or most likely) the largest class we have ever graduated’, I concluded that he wanted to pretend he was not guessing. To put it briefly, his use of the word ‘undoubtedly’ created in me a good deal of doubt as to whether he knew this was indeed the largest class the university had ever graduated.

But while his statement put itself in doubt, it also suggested a rich complex of meaning. There was a range of nuance which went further than his own communicative intent… It was a meaning which involved, in a negative way, the meanings of the other terms which could have been used in its place. Whether consciously or not, the Registrar had considered and rejected those words, and therefore the meaning of the word he did choose meant what it meant by contrast to the other terms in that little momentary ‘molecule’ of possibility (p. 11).

Note the role of discourse in the ‘large’ sense, the kind of discourse: namely, a speech at an academic ceremony. Note also the importance of the contrasting options which were available, i.e., the paradigmatic structure: no sentential modifier at all, the more modest modal ‘probably’, etc. Finally, note the selection of the option ‘undoubtedly’. Each of these is crucial for fixing the meaning – not just the last, which would be the focus of traditional views. So much is this the case that, as Caldwell notes, the dictionary meaning of ‘undoubtedly’ – *not doubted or disputed, accepted as beyond doubt* – is excluded as the correct interpretation here.
A quick recap is in order. In Sect. 1, I sketched some of our author’s biographical background, and the origins of the present work. I also issued some caveats about how to read both his work and my Introduction to it. In the just concluded section, I canvassed three radical, ‘immoderate’, views which Caldwell rejected, and his grounds for doing so. I also introduced two key steps towards a superior account of language and meaning: various methodological precepts which block the path to extremes on the one hand, and insights shared with Functionalism on the other (specifically about the essential roles of paradigmatic choice, discourse/context and function driving form). The resulting admixture, to deploy a phrase which Caldwell does not introduce but seems to me to capture the nub of things, is a Moderate Structuralism.

The next section will present the theory of linguistic meaning which emerges from Caldwell’s commitment to de-radicalizing Structuralism about language.

**Caldwell on Linguistic Meaning**

The single most important conception in Caldwell’s positive account of linguistic meaning is the molecule selection and execution structure (MSES). It is a very complex notion, especially for those coming to it from mainstream formal semantics. I will thus explicate it in several steps. I begin by fleshing out its triad of fundamental parts, each of which was hinted at above: namely, presuppositions/prior discourse, the molecule itself and the sign chosen. Once those are in hand, I will turn to how the parts combine into a whole.

Presuppositions/discourse was discussed immediately above. Here I will merely remind the reader that Caldwell highlights two senses of ‘discourse’. What he calls ‘discourses in the large sense’ are kinds of linguistic productions: instructions to a jury, the discourse of baseball, and so on. What he calls ‘discourse in the small sense’ involves the here-and-now context, of this speech episode, whether linguistic or non-linguistic.

The second part of an MSES is the molecule. Being original to Caldwell and multifaceted, it requires extensive comment. A molecule consists of ‘counters’ (also, if I understand Caldwell aright, sometimes called ‘terms’, ‘tokens’ and ‘markers’), which are potential options that a speaker may select. Importantly, not every paradigmatic alternative is included therein, since that would entail radical holism. Instead, the counters within the molecule are the reasonable options (reasonable, that is, in this context, for creatures like us, etc.). Caldwell purposely includes among counter-varieties what will strike some as an ontological hodgepodge. Counters can be salient worldly elements: ‘I believe that it is essential to recognize that language has the ability to appropriate experiential entities and bring them into discourse as deictic elements’ (p. 31) and ‘We have to remember that the world is always there before our words are uttered; by bringing it into discourse by means of the molecular sememe, we turn parts of the world into language’ (p. 39). Counters can be mental entities: perceptions, but also logico-conceptual representations. And
counters can be signs, whether ordinary language words or other semiotic symbols. Finally, saying nothing at all can be a counter (e.g., an unenthusiastic response to ‘Who wants to play Charades?’)

He includes all of these, first off, because to be a counter is to play a certain role; and many kinds of things can play the role in question, including plain old Earthly stuff, mental representations and words. (Compare the discussion above of what can serve as a rook in chess.) Caldwell, moreover, is suspicious of the alleged sharp dichotomy between worldly items versus the words which are supposed to stand for them. There are, however, additional reasons in favour of pluralism regarding kinds-of-counters. Some holistic theories of meaning, emphatically including various Structuralist ones, take meaning to consist entirely in relations among words. Thus ‘electricity’ might have its meaning specified in terms of its relation not just to the words ‘voltage’, ‘power’ and ‘juice’ but also to the words ‘wires’, ‘light’, etc. – but with no reference to worldly things like wires and light. What comes to mind immediately, when considering such a view, is what one might call ‘the Dictionary Problem’: if every term in the Dictionary is defined merely by being connected with other such terms, how does actual meaning get specified for any? Caldwell, by including parts of the world itself among counters, does not encounter this problem. Related to this is a powerful advantage of including mental items among the counters. He wants his molecules to play a role in thought, not just in speech; and he wants them to be able to do so even when items in the molecule, or the molecule as a whole, are not associated with spoken words. Making a module be an ontological hybrid permits just this. (Caldwell even suggests that, being a hybrid, his notion could be applied to music and visual art. See p. 19ff.)

Within a molecule, the counters stand in relations to one another. Caldwell stresses that this is not a matter of a mere list of members. At a minimum, there is typically a ranking as to (dis)preferred order, thereby giving rise to Markedness phenomena: if the counter selected is lower down the order, there will be an interpretive effect of some sort. (As befits his methodological proclivities, Caldwell happily allows exceptions to this generalization, noting that the ordering within a molecule can sometimes be merely an unranked list. He mentions ‘Coffee, tea or milk?’ used years ago on airline flights.) More deeply, he conceives of the relation as more like a symbiotic relationship within an ecosystem (p. 68), with each node’s meaning being partly fixed by its interactive place in the ‘web’ (to use Quine’s famous metaphor). (See p. 34 and elsewhere for his useful image of a struggle within an ‘arena’.)

The final part of the molecule is the actual counter chosen from among all of the paradigmatic options. In linguistic cases, this will be the word actually selected and produced by the speaker.

Let us revisit (1) as an example. The first part of the molecule will be the ‘presuppositions’, in Caldwell’s distinct and innovative sense. For instance, they might include that the discourse type is technical/mechanical, but among friends. And part of the antecedent discourse, in the ‘small’ sense, are the prior words: ‘Let’s put the voltmeter on the starter solenoid and see if it’s getting any’. In terms of counters, the molecule could include within it the English words ‘electricity’, ‘power’ and ‘juice’.
And it might contain, for the expert, logico-conceptual mental representations for which she lacks a word, and also worldly phenomena (e.g., the tests for voltage) which she has experienced. The final part is the word ‘juice’, the counter actually spoken. Turning finally to the relations among the counters as influenced by the ‘presuppositions’, the counter ‘juice’ will be ranked lower than other options in a technical interchange, so this choice will signal something about the speaker’s attitude or goal (a certain playfulness among the friends, for instance).

Caldwell contrasts two sorts of molecule, both involving a web composed of counters of various sorts. The fundamental sort, which he sometimes calls ‘process molecules’, pertains to particular speech episodes. These are created on-the-fly, and their counters are an ad hoc and highly dynamic set of options, fitted to this particular context. The other sort of molecule is what he labels conventionalized ‘contrastive sets’ (p. 12ff). If a molecule of the first sort gets repeated enough, always associated with the same word form, then a conventionalized molecule can be formed. (I myself think of these as ‘fossilized process molecules’ or ‘process molecule schemas’.) These latter pertain to the shared tongue and attach to word types rather than utterances thereof. For Caldwell, linguistic meaning mostly ‘flows up’ from molecules in his first ‘process’ sense to molecules in his latter sense: ‘The most radical implications of Molecular Sememics, then, are owing to its notion that meaning is created in immediate and local speech rather than in the systematics of Language, in a momentary dynamic involving the immediate juxtaposition of a term with its molecular “Others”’ (p. 19). Nonetheless, he recognizes that a ‘fossilized module’ can be drawn upon to impose some ‘top-down pressure’ on utterance meaning. Thus, via a kind of feedback loop, the fairly fixed sort of molecule, solidified into conventionalities as a result of repeated use, derives from the ad hoc kind; but the former also has an impact upon on-the-fly molecules.

I have been surveying the parts of a molecule selection and execution structure, leading up to explaining how those parts get integrated. Before moving forward, some clarifications might be useful. First, it is essential to understand that the triad just presented does not ‘have’ meaning; for Caldwell, this is what meaning is. Second, though he often speaks loosely as if it is the molecule which is the fundamental meaning-bearer, this is strictly speaking not the case. For meaning properly so called, all three parts of the MSES are required. Patently, for him, the word and its referent won’t suffice: that would exemplify the kind of atomism he most emphatically rejects. However, his reaction against the tradition runs deeper than this: to grasp the full meaning, the hearer needs to know what it was about the worldly and linguistic context which precluded those options which were not chosen. In short, the fundamental locus of meaning requires a discourse context, a selected molecule and the execution by means of choosing one of the counters. Put in a slogan, it must be molecules as marked by the name-used and appearing in a context which are meanings. It is this very recherché construct which Caldwell baptises the sememe. He writes:

The meaning belongs to the contents of this unit as a whole, as marked by (perhaps we could say “as prejudiced by” or “as prejudiced by”) the chosen name. Thus, the meaning does not belong to the word itself, but to the molecule, and to the discourse that chose and
focused the contents of that entity. I call the named molecule the ‘sememe’, for it is, I think, the fundamental unit of meaning in language (p. 36).

The fundamental unit of meaning in language, the sememe, in this view, is not a word, a morpheme, a phoneme, or (even smaller) a ‘semantic feature’. Rather, it is a larger synthetic structure – the small ‘molecule’ of possible counters from which one is chosen at any salient decision-point in the creation of an utterance (p. 89).

The foregoing merits stressing because it is not expression types but rather utterances, i.e., rubber-hits-the-road speech acts, which exhibit ‘semmes’ according to Caldwell. Though these are fleeting (and their content very contestable), nonetheless, fundamentally speaking, they are the meaning-bearers. Granted, as we just saw, repetition can give rise to conventionalized contrastive sets; as a result, not just the utterances but also the contrastive sets can ‘have meaning’ in a derivative sense, viz. in terms of their potential coercive role in actual utterances. But, at bottom, utterance meaning is ‘the real deal’. (When Caldwell writes of ‘the meaning of a word’, he will almost invariably be talking about the meaning of a token, not of a type. That is why he non-chalantly speaks of word-meaning as being so changeable.)

With all of these preliminaries in place, it is now fairly straightforward to explain the MSES itself. I will approach it from the perspective of an interpreter, rather than a speaker. The first step, corresponding to molecule selection in Caldwell’s nomenclature, is the hearer’s identification of the ‘correct’ molecule: the most salient one. Given the foregoing, that amounts to identification both of its counters and of the relationships among them. This will be ‘coerced’ (to use Caldwell’s technical term for this) by a number of things, including discourse in the ‘large’ sense (i.e., the kind of ‘language game’ being played), discourse in the ‘small’ sense (e.g., the fossilized molecules associated with the previously spoken words), the presence of other semiotic signs in the exchange, knowledge of our actual humanly experienced world, things local to this time and place, etc. The second step, corresponding to execution in Caldwell’s nomenclature, is identifying the counter actually used. The result is what was described above: not merely the referent of the counter used (nor anything else comparably ‘atomic’), but also the options that were available but were not chosen, and so forth.

Revisiting the analogy of chess, the analogous ‘counters’ therein would be the moves available at a given point in the game – interrelated, and ranked in terms of salience, rather than merely constituting a list. Moreover, consistent with Caldwell’s moderate, molecular holism, not every potential move would be among the counters: for instance, pointlessly taking a random pawn need not be. If that is a ‘chess

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3I find here deep affinities between Caldwell’s framework and Ordinary Language Philosophy, including especially the variant found in the later Wittgenstein. However, though he mentions J.L. Austin, along with Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, it seems to me that Caldwell arrived at a similar place but not due to their direct influence. (He is also a fellow traveler with my teacher Michael Gregory, especially in insisting upon the role of the cognitive in meaning-making – but that is unquestionably a matter of ‘ideas being in the air’ rather than a causal influence. See *Michael Gregory’s Proposals for a Communication Linguistics*, edited by J. de Villiers and R.J. Stainton.)
molecule’, the analogy of ‘molecule selection’ would be sorting out which molecule is in play: e.g., what the potential moves are, but also how they are ranked. As with talk, the selection of the molecule is ‘coerced’ by a host of factors: what kind of gambits the player has been pursuing so far, her larger aims, other specifics about the board, etc. The next analogy is with execution, which would consist in picking up a chess piece and moving it to a new position. Importantly, the significance of moving precisely that piece in precisely that way includes not only which option the player did opt for, but also the ones she did not.

Here again, chess provides another helpful point of comparison. There are two senses of ‘moves’, analogous to the ad hoc process molecule and the conventionalized contrastive structures respectively. There are moves here and now, in this game. But there are also kinds of moves, e.g., openings and gambits, with more or less flexible instances. Continuing the analogy, moves in the latter sense are patterns of moves in the first sense, and are hence posterior. That said, and taking into account the rest of the feedback loop mentioned above, they do play an important role in sorting out which specific molecule is at issue here and now. They do not come close to fixing it – much more is required for that – but they have an important role to play.

My discussion of the Molecule Selection and Execution Structure, and of the resulting sememes, has been brief, and leaves many questions open. To echo a point I made at the outset, this Introduction can only serve as a rough-and-ready entryway to Caldwell’s work in linguistics. (The patient reader will, thankfully, encounter many more details in the texts published below, and can thereafter jettison my oversimplifying ‘ladder’.) There is, however, one question left open which a contemporary semanticist will categorically expect Caldwell to address, yet which he mostly does not. By way of epilogue of this section, I will discuss this seemingly crucial missing element, namely a compositional semantics for sentences.

It’s fair to say that a central focus of contemporary linguistic semantics – maybe even the central focus – are combinatorial semantic rules for deriving sentence meanings from their part meanings together with grammatical structure. Such is the legacy of Frege. Now, Caldwell does not provide anything like a sentence-level grammar in the sense of algorithms for building trees: i.e., what were labelled above ‘syntagmatic relations’ among words within a sentence-level structure. He does suggest that they are collections of paradigmatic choices, and that their form is driven by discourse function, but not much more. Still less does he provide explicit rules for calculating sentence meanings on the basis of such structure, together with the molecules associated with the sentence’s morphemic parts.

Old hands will find this a truly glaring omission, and it merits explanation. Caldwell has not, as it were, ‘forgotten’ this essential topic. He has set it aside. First, this is due to his alternative focus, driven by his academic motivations and his sense of what has been improperly de-emphasized by others. He maintains that overemphasis on explicit rules, of the sort contemporary formal semantics trucks in, has steered us wrong – both in terms of what to look for, and in terms of enticing the meaning theorist to ignore crucial phenomena which are relevant even to her own goals. In particular, insofar as the omission of compositional sentential semantics in
general, and the role therein of sentence-structure in particular, can be justified, it is justified by Caldwell’s sense that what he calls the ‘paradigmatic’ has been largely ignored in the ‘formalist’ tradition. Second, the setting aside is due to Caldwell’s scepticism about whether type meaning is compositional. He denies compositionality for utterances: as we just saw, according to him there is much more that goes into a token sentence’s meaning than the parts it is made up of and what each part, taken in isolation, means – even if one follows Caldwell in taking part meanings to be fairly rich fossil-type molecules, as opposed to, say, a mere referent. He also holds that, strictly speaking, word and sentence types do not have meanings – because, strictu dictu, meanings are specific and fully fledged molecular sememes, and those only emerge in actual speech episodes. What word and sentence types have are mere potentials of a certain sort, to be manipulated in a speaker’s purposeful effort to create meanings in the genuine sense. Given this, he is very likely to deny compositionality for sentence types too, so that the ‘problem of explaining it’ just does not arise.

Many of my fellow formal semanticists will find Caldwell’s stance here frustrating. I can’t claim immunity some such frustration myself. My counsel, to echo the words of Peter Shillingsburg in his Foreword, is to approach Caldwell’s texts looking ‘for weaknesses to be fixed and for strengths that are hidden’. There’s no getting around it: Caldwell simply fails to address some of our mainstream questions. But there are other gems to be found in his writings.

Applications

Mainstream formal semanticists and philosophers of language are fascinated with language per se, and so was Caldwell. But he contrasts them in that he approached language from the perspective of quite different career-long pursuits: he was drawn into semantics qua writer of short fiction and poetry, literary critic and Professor of English. Now, it may be conceded that this unorthodox academic trajectory, as compared to the more typical formal semanticist and philosopher of language, brings some weaknesses in its wake. Be that as it may, his distinctive perspective was the source of both strength and novelty. Specifically, as hinted above, it was in part his search for a theory applicable to literary texts which left Caldwell dissatisfied with the triumvirate of extreme approaches. Radical Structuralism, recall, aimed too high; and in order to come even close to achieving its overly lofty aims, it ended up divorcing theory from actual human talk. As a result, it was wholly inapplicable to literary products. Meaning Nihilism aimed very, very low, essentially giving up on the entire enterprise, characterizing talk as so much noisy anarchy. And Radical Empiricism, while it aimed a bit higher, remained improperly satisfied with ground-level description, thereby yielding little insight into sophisticated texts.

Coming at things in terms of Caldwell’s positive views, his insistence upon an overarching theory of language which applies to both ordinary talk and to creative writing underlies what I dubbed his Moderate Structuralism – both in terms of its methodological precepts and the substantive ideas it shares with Functionalism.
That same insistence underlies his development of the molecular sememe as the crucial posit within a theory of meaning. A valuable way to conclude this Introduction, then, is to survey two illustrations of how the views explained in Sects. 2 and 3 apply to the interpretation of literary creations.

As a first illustration, recall a conundrum which dominated the twentieth-century literary theory, namely scepticism about finding the correct meaning of an author’s text. On the one hand, it seems that genuine success in textual interpretation requires identifying the exact propositional message which the author intended. On the other hand, all the reader has before her are words on paper. The problem is that no amount of the latter appears to be sufficient to arrive at what interpretive success allegedly requires.

One highly controversial response, a cousin of Meaning Nihilism, was simply to give up on finding any such ‘correct meaning of the text’. There is no potential failure to ‘find the correct meaning’, because there is nothing there to find. The sought-after meanings are illusory. As a result, there just is no sceptical conundrum to address. Caldwell, consistent with his penchant for moderation, thought this went too far: ‘Postmodernism’s discovery of the “total indeterminacy” of the text is a gross exaggeration’ (p. 94). It is his alternative response to the sceptic which constitutes our first illustration.

He approaches the problem from two directions. First, the sceptic’s criteria for successful literary interpretation are too demanding. Second, she underestimates the resources available to meet more reasonable success criteria.

Pace the sceptic, Caldwell denies that a successful interpretation of a poem or work of fiction requires arriving at one determinate meaning. Still less does success require that one find such a single determinate meaning via a blind, formal, exceptionless and universal algorithm. (As an epistemologist would put it, that the reader lacks a guaranteed method does not mean that she never arrives at a satisfactory result.) Instead, in terms of its end point, a successful reading can involve indeterminacy of a limited sort, for that is part and parcel of the kind of ‘system’ ordinary language is. Nor is this a lamentable limitation: given the kind of agents we are, such open-texture is actually a superior adaptation. In terms of the reader’s hermeneutic tools, they are very different from the fully global code which was the holy grail of certain semioticians. The author, in writing, draws on flexible skills for providing clues, not formal structural rules which can be applied blindly. The reader is therefore permitted to deploy the same: e.g., that she draws on heuristics, educated hunches and family resemblances does not mean that she must fail.

There is another sense in which the difficulty of the reader’s and critic’s task gets overstated by the sceptic: it can seem to the pessimist that there are an unlimited number of potential readings. Caldwell has the theoretical resources to urge that this is not so. Yes, it is part and parcel of his view that paradigmatic choice is essential to interpretation; however, as we saw, the ‘arbitrariness’ with respect to the potential

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4 A case in point, as discussed in Chap. 8: that there is some uncertainty about whether Hemingway’s Mrs. Macomber killed her husband on purpose is not a failing of his tale, but part of its lasting literary significance.
meanings is limited. In the given ‘local’ environment, only a relative few of the potential molecular ‘counters’ are reasonable, and the reader only needs to select among those. (To put it another way, radical holism may well lead to scepticism about meaning, but radical holism should be replaced with a more moderate option: the molecule of meaning.)

This leads to the second half of Caldwell’s anti-sceptical rebuttal. In addition to demanding a foolproof algorithm, the sceptic misconstrues the permissible interpretive tools in another sense: he radically understates the reader/critic’s interpretive resources. It is emphatically not the case that all one has to draw upon are the words on paper, and their (alleged) standing meaning in the shared ‘system’. Caldwell, recall, rejects a sharp word/world divide, hence the very idea of being provided only with ‘mere words’ is already a false step for him. More specifically, his molecules include elements of the perceived world. (The discussions of Stevens’ poems ‘An Ordinary Evening in New Haven’ and ‘No Possum, No Sop, No Taters’ illustrate especially well the importance of this.) Recall too the crucial role of discourse, in both senses, in helping to determine meaning. For instance, note the importance of discourse in Caldwell’s ‘large’ sense in his reading of both Wallace Stevens in Chap. 7 and Richard Ford in Chap. 8. That ‘No Possum’ is part of Stevens’ series of mid-winter poems is essential: knowing that it is that kind of poem yields a superior reading of it (p. 98). Similarly, understanding Ford’s short story ‘Issues’ requires recognizing that both it and Hemingway’s original prototype story ‘The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber’ fall into the same sub-kind: a man facing sexual betrayal and violent death. Turning to the ‘small’ sense, Caldwell’s notion of coerciveness of the immediately preceding discourse allows in a large swath of pertinent interpretive evidence. ‘Presupposition’, in Caldwell’s technical sense of that term, can be vast: it would include, e.g., that Richard Ford felt himself, across his entire career, to be in competition with Hemingway. Another essential tool in the interpreter’s kit are adjacent non-linguistic semiotic systems and, relatedly, what may remain ‘unsaid’ because of our shared world, and our shared biology and psychology (p. 112). Finally, Caldwell reminds us of the plain-old cleverness of the dynamic insight sort which readers bring to bear – a scepticism-defeating skill neglected by much classical semiotics.

In short, Caldwell has the linguistico-philosophical wherewithal to overcome radical scepticism about literary interpretation. To begin with, suggests Caldwell, the sceptic presents us with a false dichotomy: Either we must achieve complete success, in the sense of a guarantee of one perfectly precise and determinate reading or we must grant that ‘the author is dead’. Demand something more reasonable for what counts as ‘success’, and the threat already lessens. In addition, while it is quite reasonably granted that the ‘standing linguistic code’, as applied solely to the words before us on the page, is not all-encompassing enough to fix ‘the correct reading’, these are by no means the only tools in the reader’s kit. (Note that several of Caldwell’s methodological precepts are brought to bear here: undertaking an appropriately modest, achievable goal; not asking the abstract system to do all the work; and not detaching/divorcing language from psychology, biology or our ‘life-world’.)
I proceed now to the second illustration of how Caldwell’s views on language and meaning intersect with the interpretation of fiction and poetry.

One might encapsulate the first illustration as follows: ‘Caldwell simultaneously insists that less is required for interpretive success, and that we have unheralded tools at our disposal’. I think this description is correct, so far as it goes. Nonetheless, it is misleading because Caldwell also maintains that the critic’s goal can extend beyond finding ‘the intended propositional message’. Complete success, to the contrary, entails uncovering the molecule selection and execution structures in the text – that, after all, is what meanings strictly speaking are. ‘Success’ therefore entails, in part, finding the reasonable counters given the context, whether they be linguistic, mental or worldly. It equally entails identifying the words the writer could have ‘executed’ but did not, their comparative ranking, and so on. (Speaking of the latter, part of a fully successful reading of a text is highlighting the author’s marked choices: e.g., when a lower ranked counter is the one which is ‘executed’. An excellent example is Caldwell’s discussion, in Chap. 7, of the verbs of action in Stevens’ ‘No Possum’; see p. 99ff.)

The demand that the interpreter considers paradigmatic structure and the author’s ultimate linguistic choice yields richer literary rewards. As an example, consider the name of Ford’s female character. Among the logically possible ‘counters’ for the heroine of ‘Issues’ are ‘Alice’, ‘Blaise’, ‘Carlotta’, etc., though many are not ‘locally’ relevant. Among the reasonable ones given the discourse-context is ‘Margot’, for that is the name of Francis Macomber’s wife in Hemingway’s story. And this presence of ‘Margot’ among the viable potential choices carries information, on Caldwell’s approach – so that the ultimate meaning of the proper name ‘Marjorie’, the actually ‘executed’ term, is definitely not exhausted by its referent. In sum, rethinking the appropriate interpretive goal, Caldwell also increases the demands on the critic somewhat, to include sorting out what the ‘arena’ in the text is, and what the ‘struggle’ was among the options – not just ‘who the winner was’ (i.e., which word was tokened).

I end by revisiting my warning about the limitations of this Introduction. I hope that it will indeed serve as a useful point of departure for scholars first encountering Caldwell’s rich and demanding work. I hope it will serve, moreover, as an entryway for those who will eventually manage the careful exegesis that I have not even aimed for here.

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