

# THE PLATONIST VIEW ABOUT THE SUBJECT MATTER OF LINGUISTICS

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## ABSTRACT

The Platonist view in philosophy of linguistics states that grammars are theories of abstract objects. In this paper I will focus on the Platonist view in philosophy of linguistics as stated in Katz's «An Outline of Platonist Grammar» (1984) and Soames' «Linguistics and Psychology» (1984) and «Semantics and Psychology» (1985). I will begin explaining which are the core ideas of the Platonist view in philosophy of linguistics. Then, I will comment on the argument offered by Katz's in order to argue for the Platonist view. Finally, I will explain Soames' arguments in order to show that psychology and linguistics are conceptually and empirically different.

KEYWORDS: Conceptualism, Katz, Philosophy of Linguistics, Platonism, Soames.

## RESUMEN

«El punto de vista platónico acerca de la materia objeto de estudio en la lingüística». El platonismo en filosofía de la lingüística afirma que las gramáticas son teorías sobre objetos abstractos. En este artículo me centraré en el platonismo en filosofía de la lingüística tal y como es expuesto por Katz en su «An Outline of Platonist Grammar» (1984) y por Soames en sus «Linguistics and Psychology» (1984) y «Semantics and Psychology» (1985). Empezaré explicando cuáles son las ideas centrales del platonismo en filosofía de la lingüística. Después, comentaré el argumento ofrecido por Katz a favor del platonismo. Por último, explicaré los argumentos usados por Soames para mostrar que la psicología y la lingüística son conceptualmente y empíricamente distintas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: conceptualismo, Katz, filosofía de la lingüística, platonismo, Soames.



## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I am going to expound the Platonist view in philosophy of linguistics as stated in Katz's «An Outline of Platonist Grammar»<sup>1</sup> and Soames' «Linguistics and Psychology»<sup>2</sup> and «Semantics and Psychology»<sup>3</sup>. The Platonist view aims to give an answer to the question of what is the subject matter of linguistics. Its main claim is that grammars are theories of abstract objects.<sup>4</sup> This idea is well summarized by Katz:

[...] grammars are theories of the structure of sentences, conceived of as abstract objects in the way that Platonists in the philosophy of mathematics conceive of numbers. Sentences, on this view, are not taken to be located here or there in physical space like sound waves or deposits of ink, and they are not taken to occur either at one time or another or in one subjectivity or another in the manner of mental events and states. Rather, sentences are taken to be abstract and objective. They are entities whose structure we discover by intuition and reason, not by perception and induction<sup>5</sup>.

In defending Platonism, Katz and Soames explicitly argue against the view that linguistics is a theory about something psychological.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, Katz is correct in saying that to object to Platonists that they do not take into account the psychological data regarding the speaker's/hearer's capacities<sup>7</sup> is to beg the question in favor of the psychological view, because this is, precisely, what is at stake in the debate<sup>8</sup>.

However, it is important to remark that Platonism is not committed to discredit the study of psychological data.<sup>9</sup> What Platonism claims is that linguistics is

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<sup>1</sup> KATZ, Jerrold J. «An Outline of Platonist Grammar», in: «BREVER, T., CARROLL, J.M., and MILLER, L.A. (eds.) *Taking Minds: The Study of Language in Cognitive Sciences*. MIT Press, 1984, pp. 1-33. [Reprinted in: KATZ, Jerrold J. (ed.) *The Philosophy of Linguistics*. Oxford University Press, 1985, pp. 172-203.

<sup>2</sup> SOAMES, Scott. «Linguistics and Psychology». *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 7, 1984, pp. 155-179.

<sup>3</sup> SOAMES, Scott. «Semantics and Psychology», in: KATZ, Jerrold J. (ed.) *The Philosophy of Linguistics*. Oxford University Press, 1985, pp. 204-226.

<sup>4</sup> KATZ, Jerrold J. *op. cit.*, 1984, p. 192.

<sup>5</sup> KATZ, Jerrold J. *op. cit.*, 1984, p. 174.

<sup>6</sup> SOAMES, Scott. *op. cit.*, 1984, p.155; SOAMES, Scott. *op. cit.*, 1985, p. 206; KATZ, Jerrold J. *op. cit.*, 1984, p. 172-173.

<sup>7</sup> As Fodor does in his «Introduction: Some Notes on What Linguistics is About», pp. 200-201, in: BLOCK, N. (ed.) *Readings in the Philosophy of Psychology: Volume two*. Harvard University Press, 1981, pp. 197-207.

<sup>8</sup> In Katz's words: «It can no more be to the discredit of Platonism that it doesn't pay attention to psychological capacities than it can be to the discredit of Fodor's psychologism that it doesn't pay attention to abstract objects» (KATZ, Jerrold J. *op. cit.*, 1984, p. 177).

<sup>9</sup> KATZ, Jerrold J. *op. cit.*, 1984, pp. 192-193; SOAMES, Scott. *op. cit.*, 1984, p. 158 and p. 161.



only about abstract objects —and, therefore, that the subject matter of linguistics is not anything psychological. But this does not imply that psychological data lacks of any interest at all or that it cannot be studied by other disciplines such as psychology or cognitive sciences. In Katz's words:

[...] Platonism denies that theories in linguistics are about psychological states, processes, etc., but does not deny the existence of such states, processes, etc., or the legitimacy of their study in psychology, computer science, neurophysiology, etc. The Platonist in linguistics no more denies the existence of linguistic knowledge or the legitimacy of its study in empirical science than the Platonist in mathematics or logic denies the existence of mathematical or logical knowledge or the legitimacy of their study in empirical science. Thus, no one should object to Platonism on the grounds that it prevents us from making use of grammatical theories in the explanation of the human ability to acquire and use languages. The use of these theories in such explanations is like applied mathematics. The issue at hand is whether linguistic concerns a realm of grammatical objects beyond psychology<sup>10</sup>.

In their criticism to the psychological view, both authors use the distinction between «[...] the *knowledge* speakers have of their language and the *languages* that speakers have knowledge of»<sup>11</sup>. Katz and Soames argue that supporters of the psychological view fail to recognize this distinction, and this is what lead them to conclude that linguistics is a theory of something psychological —that is: about the speaker's knowledge of their language and the speaker's abilities to use their language. But to ignore this distinction, the Platonists say, is just as to confuse the way mathematical numbers *are* with the way that mathematical numbers *are used* by humans in arithmetical reasoning.

The question of what is the subject matter of linguistics is an interesting question that all linguists must worry about, in so far that the answer given to this question will have deep consequences in the development of linguistics. Thus, for example, if we have a clear answer about which is the object of study in linguistics, then we will have a clear answer of what are the proper methods for studying linguistics.<sup>12</sup> At any rate, it is important to point that this question is not only interesting for linguists, but also for philosophers. Those philosophers that want to face the metaphysical question of realism —that is: the claim that abstract objects exist— need to discover whether linguistic objects are abstract in order to know whether realism is correct or not<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> KATZ, Jerrold J. *op. cit.*, 1984, pp. 192-193.

<sup>11</sup> KATZ, Jerrold J. *op. cit.*, 1984, p. 193, emphasis of the author. The distinction is explicitly stated in Katz but it is also used by Soames when he claims that linguistics and cognitive psychology differ in the same sense than «[...] elementary number theory [differ] with psychological theories of the cognitive processes underlying ordinary arithmetical reasoning». (SOAMES, Scott. *op. cit.*, 1984, p.157).

<sup>12</sup> KATZ, Jerrold J. «Introduction», p. 15, in: KATZ, Jerrold J. (ed.) *The Philosophy of Linguistics*. Oxford University Press, 1985; KATZ, Jerrold J. *op. cit.*, 1984, p. 181.

<sup>13</sup> KATZ, Jerrold J. *op. cit.*, 1984, p. 184; KATZ, Jerrold J. *op. cit.*, 1985, p. 11.



## 2. KATZ'S ARGUMENT BY ELIMINATION

In his «An outline of Platonist Grammar», Katz offers an argument for the Platonist view in philosophy of linguistics. I will refer to it as Katz's argument by elimination.

The argument goes as follows. There are, according to Katz, *only* three ontological possibilities to answer the question of what linguistics is a theory of: nominalism (which claims that linguistics is about physical concrete objects), conceptualism (which claims that linguistics is about mental concrete objects) and Platonism (which claims that linguistics is about abstract objects). Katz assumes the success of conceptualism's objections to nominalism but claims that these objections have no effect on Platonism. Then, Katz criticizes conceptualism. So, Katz concludes, Platonism is the only way left and, therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that Platonism is the correct answer. The argument is stated by Katz as follows:

The arguments of conceptualists against Platonism in linguistics have little force. If Platonism in its turn can mount a successful argument against the psychological concept of grammars, then, coupling this argument with Chomsky's argument against the structuralist concept, we obtain a strong case for the Platonist view that grammars are theories of abstract objects. The reason is that nominalism, conceptualism and Platonism exhaust the ontological possibilities. One can take the objects of a theory to be concrete, physical particulars, as the nominalist does, or take them to be psychological, mental, or biological particulars, as the conceptualist does, or deny they are particulars at all and take them to be atemporal, aspatial objective entities, as the Platonist does<sup>14</sup>.

In criticizing conceptualism, Katz exploits the distinction sketched before between *the language speakers know* and *the knowledge that speakers have of their language*. According to Katz, conceptualism claims that linguistics is a theory of *the knowledge that speakers have of their language*; but this, Katz says, is just to posit an intermediary for the study of *the language speakers know*. And there is no guarantee that this intermediary, the mental medium, is a proper way to study *the language speakers know*; that is: there is no guarantee that the way that languages *are used* by humans is the same than the way languages *are*. In Katz's words:

Conceptualists have to construct grammars as theories of the *knowledge* an ideal speaker has of the language, whereas Platonists construct grammars as theories of the *language* that such knowledge is knowledge of. Therefore, the conceptualist's theories address themselves to the *internal cognitive representation* that humans have of such things as well-formedness, ambiguity, word-formation, ellipsis and synonymy whereas a theory of the language should address itself to well-formedness, ambiguity, word-formation, ellipsis, and synonymy themselves. Because the mental medium in which human knowledge is internally represented can materially

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<sup>14</sup> KATZ, Jerrold J. *op. cit.*, 1984, p. 180-181.



influence the character of the representation, there can be a significant divergence between what a theory of such an internal representation says and what is true of the language. Hence, only in the case of conceptualism is there the possibility of conflicts between ideologically inspired, extrinsic constraints and intrinsic constraints<sup>15</sup>.

However, this is not, in my opinion, a real objection for conceptualism. What Katz is claiming here is that there is no reason to trust that the study of *the knowledge that speakers have of their language* is tantamount to the study of *the language speakers know*. But this seems to be what is at stake in the debate: a conceptualist does not need to accept that *the knowledge that speakers have of their language* is a medium for the study of *the language speakers know* given that, for a conceptualist, there is no distinction between these two things.

Katz offers a second objection to conceptualism: there are some grammatical properties of sentences of natural language that cannot be explained if we accept that linguistics is a theory of something psychological. This is the case of analyticity.<sup>16</sup> Conceptualist theories must say that the necessity involved in cases of analyticity is due to our psychology —more concretely: that we cannot conceive analytical truths to be false given our psychological makeup. But this is not, Katz says, what is going on in analyticity: sentences that involve analyticity are not sentences that *we cannot conceive* to be false, but sentences that *cannot be* false —that are «[...] true no matter what [...]»<sup>17</sup>. In Katz's words:

Theories of natural languages ought not preclude explanation of the grammatical properties of their sentences. At the very least, a theory of natural language ought not rule out the possibility of accounting for necessary truths [...] which owe their necessity to the language. But this is exactly what conceptualists theories of natural language do in treating grammar as theories of psychological principles and in treating linguistic theory as a theory of the innate basis for internalizing such principles. Conceptualist theories are limited to accounting for necessary truths [...] as nothing more than consequences of principles that human beings, by virtue of their psychological or biological make-up, cannot take to be false. Such necessary truths come out on the conceptualist's account as merely what human beings are psychologically or biologically forced to conceive to be true no matter what. But this is a far cry from what *is* true no matter what. On the conceptualist's account, impossible objects like *genuine coin of the realm which is counterfeit* are nothing more than something humans cannot conceive. Conceptualists must treat such *impossible* objects as four-dimensional space was once treated, inconceivable by us but for all we know quite possible<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> KATZ, Jerrold J. *op. cit.*, 1984, p. 196, emphasis of the author.

<sup>16</sup> The examples given by Katz of sentences that involve analyticity are: «All nightmares are dreams», «People convinced of the truth of Platonism believe Platonism to be true», «Flawed gems are imperfect», «Genuine coin of the realm is not counterfeit» (KATZ, Jerrold J. *op. cit.*, 1984, p. 199).

<sup>17</sup> KATZ, Jerrold J. *op. cit.*, 1984, p. 200.

<sup>18</sup> KATZ, Jerrold J. *op. cit.*, 1984, p. 200, emphasis of the author.



On the other hand, Katz argues that Platonism is the only one of the three ontological possibilities that can give a successful account of analyticity<sup>19</sup>. Given that Platonism focus directly on the properties that language has, it can conclude that analytical truths derive its necessity from language itself and, therefore, that they do not owe their necessity to human psychology.

### 3. SOAMES: LINGUISTICS AND PSYCHOLOGY ARE CONCEPTUALLY AND EMPIRICALLY DISTINCT

In his «Linguistic and Psychology» (1984), Soames claims that linguistics is not, and cannot be, a theory of something psychological. In order to defend this claim, Soames argues that linguistics and psychology are conceptually and empirically different: they are conceptually distinct because «[...] they are concerned with different domains, make different claims, and are established by different means»<sup>20</sup>, and they are empirically divergent because «[...] the formal structures utilized by optimal linguistic theories are not likely to be isomorphic to the internal representations posited by theories in cognitive psychology»<sup>21</sup>. Thus, according to Soames, psychology and linguistics are two different disciplines: «Linguistics aims at providing theories of natural languages; cognitive psychology aims at providing theories of natural language users»<sup>22</sup>.

#### 3.1. CONCEPTUAL DISTINCTIVENESS: THE LEADING QUESTIONS ARGUMENT

In order to show that psychology and linguistics are conceptually distinct, Soames uses an argument that we will call as 'the leading questions argument'.

There are, according to Soames, three questions that move and guide the theoretical enterprise of doing linguistics and, therefore, that allow us to define a domain for linguistics. Because of this, these questions also allow us to distinguish which facts are relevant for linguistics —to wit: linguistic facts are those that are relevant in order to give an answer to the leading questions. These questions are, according to Soames, grounded in a «pre-theoretical grasp of what constitutes a language»<sup>23</sup>. These three leading questions are the following ones:

(Q1) In what ways are... [some (or all) natural languages] alike and in what ways do they differ from one another? (Q2) What (if anything) distinguishes natural languages from... [some artificial language]? (Q3) In what ways have (has)... [some

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<sup>19</sup> KATZ, Jerrold J. *op. cit.*, 1984, p. 200.

<sup>20</sup> SOAMES, Scott. *op. cit.*, 1984, p. 155.

<sup>21</sup> SOAMES, Scott. *op. cit.*, 1984, p. 155.

<sup>22</sup> SOAMES, Scott. *op. cit.*, 1984, p. 157.

<sup>23</sup> SOAMES, Scott. *op. cit.*, 1984, p. 161.



natural language] changed and in what ways have (has)... [some natural language, the same as before] remained the same?<sup>24</sup>.

In order to show that psychology and linguistics are conceptually distinct, Soames will argue: first, that there are linguistic facts that are not psychological; and, second, that there are psychological facts about language that are not linguistic facts<sup>25</sup>.

Languages can be individuated through its semantics, which include, among other things, an account of the truth conditions of the sentences of the language<sup>26</sup>. Thus, claims about truth conditions are relevant in order to answer the three leading questions and, therefore, any linguistic theory must take them into account.<sup>27</sup> But truth conditions are not psychological; therefore: there are facts which fail under the domain of linguistics but, nonetheless, they are not psychological. The main reason given by Soames for why truth conditions are not psychological facts is the following:

Even if the sentences to be evaluated are taken to be internal representations, and hence, within the domain of mentalistic theories, a complete specification of the non-linguistic conditions under which they are true will not follow from a specification of mental states and processes, or a description of the relationship between sensory input and behavioral output<sup>28</sup>.

Moreover, there are psychological facts about language that do not serve to the purpose of answering the leading question —given that they do not play any role in individuating languages— and, therefore, these psychological facts are not relevant to linguistics and are not linguistic facts at all.<sup>29</sup> For example: two speakers may speak the same language even if one of them processes the sentences faster than the other, or even if one of them makes fewer mistakes in comprehending sentences of a concrete type than the other does<sup>30</sup>.

If Soames' arguments are correct —that is: if there are linguistic facts that are not psychological and there are psychological facts that are not linguistic facts—, then it seems that we can conclude that linguistics and psychology are concerned with different domains and, therefore, that they are conceptually distinct.

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<sup>24</sup> SOAMES, Scott. *op. cit.*, 1984, p. 158.

<sup>25</sup> SOAMES, Scott. *op. cit.*, 1984, p. 162.

<sup>26</sup> SOAMES, Scott. *op. cit.*, 1984, p. 162.

<sup>27</sup> In Soames' words: «[...] languages may differ not only with respect to syntactic and phonological properties, but also with respect to semantic properties involving truth conditions. A linguistic theory that failed to account for truth conditions would miss these differences and, in extreme cases, would fail to distinguish different languages (i.e., languages with the same syntax and phonology, but different assignments of truth conditions to sentences). Since the job of a linguistic theory is to specify the similarities and differences among (possible) languages, such a theory must be sensitive to truth conditions (or elements that determine them)» (SOAMES, Scott. *op. cit.*, 1984, pp. 162-163).

<sup>28</sup> SOAMES, Scott. *op. cit.*, 1984, p. 163.

<sup>29</sup> SOAMES, Scott. *op. cit.*, 1984, p. 164.

<sup>30</sup> SOAMES, Scott. *op. cit.*, 1984, p. 164.



### 3.2. EMPIRICAL DIVERGENCE: NO STRUCTURAL ISOMORPHISM

In order to defend the claim that linguistics and psychology are empirically divergent, Soames argues that there is not —or, at least, that it is highly improbable that there is— an isomorphism between the formal structures posited by linguistics and the mental structures posited by psycholinguistics.

Soames' argument is as follows. As we have seen, linguistics and psychology are conceptually distinct, and this means, among other things, that each of them deals with a very different kind of facts: linguistic facts, on the one hand, and psychological facts, on the other hand. Although it can be argued that there is sometimes a correspondence between these two different kinds of facts —e.g. it can be argued that «[...] all and only grammatical sentences (or syntactically ambiguous sentences) would be judged by speakers (under appropriate conditions) to be grammatical (or syntactically ambiguous)»<sup>31</sup>, there are cases in which there seems to be no correspondence between these two kind of facts at all —e.g. it is not clear which would be the psychological data that would correspond to those linguistic facts such as truth conditions, and logical properties and relations<sup>32</sup>.

## 4. CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, we can briefly enumerate the main ideas of this paper.

First, we have seen that Platonism's main claim is that the subject matter of linguistics are abstract objects. In defending this, platonists deny that psychology has anything to do with linguistics. However, this does not commit platonists to claim that the study of psychological data has no interest at all: the point is that psychological data is not relevant for linguistics, but not that it cannot have some interest for other disciplines such as psychology or cognitive sciences.

Second, in order to criticize the psychological view in philosophy of linguistics —that is: the claim that linguistics is a theory of psychological objects—, both authors use the distinction between *the language speakers know* and *the knowledge speakers have of their language*. According to Katz, failing to recognize this distinction is what conduce the supporters of the psychological view to conclude that linguistics is a theory about something psychological.

Third, the question for Platonism in philosophy of linguistics is an interesting question for all linguists, because the answer given to this question will have deep consequences in the practical development of the discipline. But it is also an interesting question for philosophers, given that it is a question that we must face if we want to discover whether metaphysical realism is true or not.

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<sup>31</sup> SOAMES, Scott. *op. cit.*, 1984, p. 168.

<sup>32</sup> SOAMES, Scott. *op. cit.*, 1984, p. 169.





Fourth, we have seen that Katz's argument by elimination tries to show that Platonism in philosophy of linguistics is true. The argument is based on the claim that there are *only* three ontological possibilities to answer the question of what is the subject matter of linguistics: nominalism, conceptualism and Platonism. Katz assumes the success of conceptualism's objections to nominalism but claims that these objections have no effect on Platonism. Then, Katz criticizes conceptualism. So, Katz concludes, Platonism is the only way left.

Fifth, Katz's critiques to conceptualism relies on the distinction between *the language speakers know* and *the knowledge speakers have of their language*. Katz argues that conceptualism makes linguistics to focus on *the knowledge speakers have of their language*, but there is no guarantee that this is a proper way to study *the language speakers know*—that is: there is no guarantee that the way that languages *are used* by humans is the same than the way languages *are*.

Sixth, we have seen that Soames argues that linguistics and psychology are two different disciplines, in so far that he takes them to be conceptually distinct and empirically divergent.

Seventh, in order to defend that linguistics and psychology are conceptually distinct, Soames uses what I have called the «leading questions argument». Soames argues, on the one hand, that there are linguistic facts that are not psychological facts (e.g. claims about truth conditions of the sentences of a language) and, on the other hand, that there are psychological facts that are not linguistic facts (e.g. psychological data about reaction time or error date); therefore, Soames concludes, linguistics and psychology are conceptually distinct.

Eight, in order to defend that linguistics and psychology are empirically divergent, Soames argues that there is not—or, at least, that it is highly improbable that there is—an isomorphism between the formal structures posited by linguistics and the mental structures posited by psycholinguistics. The reason given by Soames is that it is not clear which would be the psychological data that would correspond to linguistic facts such as truth conditions, and logical properties and relations.

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