Predication as a Primitive of Syn/Sem Combination
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Heim and Kratzer in their influential 1998 textbook (pg 2-3) use the term ‘Frege’s Conjecture’ to refer to the idea that function-argument composition is the only semantic glue that combines one element of the syn-sem representation with another to create a complex meaningful form. (“And it is a natural conjecture that logical combination of parts into a whole is always a matter of saturating something unsaturated.” translation Heim and Kratzer, from Gottlob Frege 1923. ”Logische Untersuchungen. Dritter Teil:Gedankengefüge”). But the principle of compositionality as thus stated is reduced to vacuity once higher order functions are admitted without constraint into the system of formal semantic representation (cf. also Higginbotham 2007), where any object of arbitrary high type can be the saturator in the function-argument composition. The sheer power of the unfettered lambda calculus (in many ways a blessing) makes it unsuitable for deriving constraints on natural language. Rather, semanticists must turn to the constraints and generalizations discovered by syntacticians to impose limits on kinds of semantic primitives and combinations that are explanatory for complex concept building in language. In one important strand of research Paul Pietroski for example (Pietroski 2005, 2006, 2007) has explored a much more austere combinatory glue for semantic composition, namely the conjunction of monadic predicates. Once of the consequences of this move is that as the modes of combination become more genuinely austere, the underlying ontology of sorts and the kinds of relations that are stored as monadic predicates gets somewhat richer. In particular, Pietroski is forced to assume a rich set of Thematic Role predicates as individual elements of the lexicon that connect individuals denoted by DPs to event individuals constructed by verbal items. This, I argue, is problematic in the light of the failure so far to give a precise characterization of what these relations should be, and also because it poses severe learnability problems.

In this paper, I will go back to the original intuition behind the idea of predication in an attempt to rescue it from implementational triviality and restore it to its central position. I will show that if suitably constrained to apply only to atomic individuals in the ontology, it is a good candidate for being one of the principal forms of semantic glue by which concepts are integrated in the syn-sem computation. Specifically, I will argue that event decomposition (required independently from generalizations over verbal concepts) combined with predication, can completely eliminate the need for explicit thematic role relations. I will argue that this considerably simplifies the overall system and moreover argues for the centrality of this most basic kind of cognitively plausible predication relation as being a genuine primitive of the symbolic system, one that is crucial for the integration of the independent functional sequences corresponding to the nominal and verbal extended projections.