

Center for Cognitive Science

University at Buffalo, State University of New York

Wednesday, April 12, 2006

280 Park Hall
North Campus
2:00 pm -4:00 pm

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A Formal Theory of Family Resemblance

One of Wittgenstein's major insights is about the nature of meaning: According to him it is often impossible to link the meanings of words to necessary and sufficient conditions. His prime example is the word game: Soccer, chess, table tennis, and Pac Man are very different. It seems to be futile to look for (non-trivial) necessary and sufficient conditions that allow us to categorize them as games. Hence, according to Wittgenstein, we should reject any theory which ties meaning to strict conditions. Meaning arises from the praxis of speakers, it is the result of 'language games'.

'Language games', 'family resemblance' and similar metaphors are not really helpful, if one wants to build a formal semantics. My aim is to present a rigorous account of Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblance. By the very nature of formal semantics my proposal will involve crystal clear truth conditions for propositions like 'This is a game'; however it will do it in a way which is consistent with Wittgenstein's insights.

Open to the public!

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