INTRODUCTION TO PROPOSITIONAL ATTITUDES

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The most important of my formative years were without doubt the three I spent as a Ph.D. student at UCLA (1965–1968). As it must be for most people who end up spending their lives in academia, during those three years I came to feel and see myself as a member of a scientific community. That community may have shifted somewhat in the course of my subsequent career, but my sense of allegiance to what I perceive as my intellectual home remains as crystallized during my days as a graduate student in Los Angeles. The community into which I was absorbed, when I came to UCLA, was roughly what later (mainly, I believe, in the seventies and eighties) was sometimes referred to as 'Southern California Semantics'. In my recollection this 'community', if that is the right word for it, was never very large, but its impact has been very considerable, mainly through the work of Richard Montague, David Kaplan and David Lewis. For me, its impact was enormous and invaluable. It may seem strange for me to make these rather personal statements in the Introduction to one of the parts of this book, but there is a reason. It is this. One of the credos of this community can be fairly described, I think, as anti-psychologism. It was intellectually, and perhaps also emotionally, connected with a commitment to formalization as the royal road to conceptual clarity and philosophical salvation. That attitude wasn’t, by the way, limited to philosophy at UCLA, or to the loose affiliation of logicians and philosophers pivoting around UCLA’s Philosophy Department; it also included philosophical logicians of an extensionalist persuasion such as Willard van Orman Quine or Nelson Goodman, and arguably also Saul Kripke. The issue on which this anti-psychologism left its deepest mark was the semantics of attitude reports. Here its influence was what I came to see later as inhibitive, a moratorium on all attempts to say anything about this topic that smacked—if ever so slightly—of irresponsible speculation about the structure and content of the human mind. Part of the reason for this essentially negative positioning was no doubt a strongly felt resistance against ‘psychologistic’ attempts to deal with the semantics of attitudes and other vocabulary, such as the Semantic Marker theory of Jerrold Katz and Jerry Fodor, widely discussed at that time. To some extent that resistance was understandable: to many members of the SouCalSem
community there was much in the Katz & Fodor account that they saw as question begging (as well as technically inept). But the emphatic rejection of approaches like this one reinforced an attitude towards issues situated on the borderline between language and mind that now strike me as curiously bloodless. It took a good part of my professional life before I would even admit such a thought and a good deal more to arrive at what I have come to see as a potentially viable alternative to those bloodless accounts, which accompanied me during those final years of intellectually growing up, and for many more years beyond. The two papers in this part are part of the larger effort to develop that alternative and are, indirectly, also witnesses to the struggle I had to make to free myself from these earlier dogmata.

From the perspective of that alternative, the accounts of the semantics of attitude reporting sentences that the SouCalSem community and others developed and advocated do not only seem rather anaemic and non-committal; there also is a curiously defensive streak to them. The historical grounds for that are not hard to find. The problem one was facing was essentially Gottlob Frege’s, who had appealed to the distinction between sense and reference as a way out of what could be called the ‘equivalence trap’: if your account of the semantic values of sentences (and other expressions) is too coarse, then there is no hope of getting the semantics of attitude-reporting sentences right. The argument is overly familiar: suppose that the sentences $S_1$ and $S_2$ get the same semantic value for any notion of semantic value your theory can supply. Then your theory must assign the same semantic values to $x$ believes that $S_1$ and to $x$ believes that $S_2$—if it is assumed that the semantic value of $x$ believes that $S$ is fully determined by the semantic values of $x$ and $S$; but compositionality was taken for granted. So if the semantic values aren’t fine-grained enough, $S_1$ and $S_2$ cannot be distinguished in terms of their values, even when it seems intuitively possible for $x$ believes that $S_1$ to be true and at the same time for $x$ believes that $S_2$ to be false. If the theory is to account for that possibility, it has to come up with values that make finer distinctions to $S_1$ and $S_2$ semantically apart. Developing well-motivated accounts of semantics that deliver values to individuate finely enough has proved very hard. A proof of how hard was involuntarily supplied by Alonzo Church in his first attempt to develop a mathematically precise formalization of Frege’s sense-reference distinction, which, in spite of Church’s proverbial care and precision, failed through an unintended collapse into the purely extensional.

It is partly in the light of such failures that Montague’s Higher Order Intensional Logic (HOIL) can be seen for the very important achievement it