Fodor’s asymmetric dependence theory

**Simple idea**  “cow” (and COW) means cow because cows cause “cow” (COW) tokens.

- a “cow” token: an utterance of the sound “cow” or a written inscription of c-o-w
- a COW token: a “concept” or mental representation: a token in the language of thought.

**Problem with the simple idea**  Lots of things besides cows would cause “cow” tokens. (Horses on a dark night, thoughts of milk, desires to see cows, pictures of cows, statues of cows, cow pies.)

**Fodor’s Solution**  These other things only cause “cow” tokens because cows do. If cows didn’t cause “cow” tokens, then these other things wouldn’t either.

“cow” mean cow if

(i) cows cause “cow” tokens

(ii) For all X other than cows that cause “cow” tokens:
- If cows didn’t cause “cow” tokens, then X’s wouldn’t either.
- But even if Xs didn’t cause “cow” tokens, cows would still cause “cow” tokens.
- That is: break cows ⇒ “cow” tokens and you break Xs ⇒ “cow” tokens, but not vice versa.
- That is: the Xs ⇒ “cow” tokens link is asymmetrically dependent on the cows ⇒ “cow” tokens link.

Example: fire and smoke both cause “smoke” tokens. But fire would not cause “smoke” tokens if “smoke” did not (p. 93).

Note: this account is supposed to be purely dispositional. It doesn’t make reference to the actual history or situation of the creature. (Fodor: there could be a lawlike connection between the property of being a cow and the property of being a cause of “cow” tokens even if there were no cows or “cow” tokens.)

**Subjunctive conditionals**  Fodor’s account makes facts about representation depend on the truth of subjunctive (also called “counterfactual”) conditionals.

- *subjunctive*: If Oswald hadn’t killed Kennedy, someone else would have.
- *indicative*: If Oswald didn’t kill Kennedy, someone else did.

How do we decide whether a subjunctive conditional is true?

*First try:* $A \Box \rightarrow B$ is true iff there is no possible way that $A$ could occur without $B$.

*Too strong!* “If the brakes had worked properly, he wouldn’t have crashed.”

*Lewis/Stalnaker semantics:* $A \Box \rightarrow B$ is true iff $B$ is true at the closest possible world(s) where $A$ is true.
**Application: flies or black dots?** Does state $A$ in the frog’s brain represent black dots or flies? Fodor says black dots (106). Why? Because although we have both

(i) flies cause $A$s, and
(ii) black dots cause $A$s,

(i) is asymmetrically dependent on (ii). Given the facts about the frog’s perceptual system,

- if black dots didn’t cause $A$s, flies wouldn’t either, but
- if flies didn’t cause $A$s, black dots would still cause $A$s.

“The bottom line is that it’s impossible for frogs to have FLY concepts but not impossible for us to have FLY concepts. This is because it’s consonant with our psychology, but not with theirs, to sometimes distinguish flies from bee-bees.” (108)

**Why not say that $A$ represents retinal patterns?** After all, the frog can have one of these retinal patterns even without a black dot actually in the air! Fodor (109-10): There’s no reason to think that there’s any property between being a black dot and being an $A$-state that’s lawfully connected with $A$s.

**Application: twin earth** In our pre-1750 people, “water” tokens would be caused by both water (H2O) and XYZ. Can Fodor’s theory predict that their content is *water*, not *XYZ*?

- if water didn’t cause “water” tokens, XYZ wouldn’t either, but
- if XYZ didn’t cause “water” tokens, water would still cause “water” tokens.

Fodor: the nearest world where XYZ doesn’t cause “water” tokens is a world where people can distinguish water from XYZ. (Not, say, a world where the word “aqua” is used and “water” isn’t a word.)

**Problem** How do we determine which world is “closest” or “most similar”? (That is, how do we determine what to “keep fixed” when we consider our counterfactual situation?)

1. If Caesar had commanded in Vietnam, he would have used catapults.
2. If Caesar had commanded in Vietnam, he would have used the A-bomb.
3. If Obama and Romney had been in the same party, they would have been Democrats.
4. If Obama and Romney had been in the same party, they would have been Republicans.

“If God has a look at both the actual causal relations of your mental states and the surrounding space of counterfactual causal relations, then He can tell the content of your state.” (Fodor, p. 125)

The God’s eye point of view is supposed to be free of particular interests and perspectives. But if we suppose that God doesn’t have particular interests and purposes, then it’s not clear that these counterfactuals will have any truth values at all. (What would fix which worlds were “closest”?) On the other hand, if we suppose that God does have interests, then doesn’t our whole account of intentional content presuppose God’s intentionality?

“you can say what asymmetric dependence is without resort to intentional or semantic idiom.” (Fodor, p. 92)