

Personal notes on the retirement of Groenendijk, Stokhof, Veltman, Janssen and Scha

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Dear Jeroen, Martin, Frank, Theo and Remko,

It is the first time for me to be writing on the retirement of my teachers and colleagues. In the beginning I felt embarrassed and didn't know where to start. Therefore, like any good Israeli, I started with a special request to the organizers. I asked for, and was happy to be granted, a permission to address this "open personal letter" to the five of you. The reason for my request is that I feel that your retirement, each of you personally and all of you together, marks an era in the development of formal semantics. Here in the Netherlands I notice very strongly the transition in the field and in my own work. I know that the same feeling is shared by many formal semanticists in other places. I hope I can briefly explain why I believe that this state of transition in formal semantics is connected so strongly to your work.

When I first met Frank, somewhere in the fall of 1992, I was a young master student in Tel-Aviv. We spent some nice hours in the sun, talking about Frank's data semantics and how I was trying to use it within my master research. This was my first academic discussion with a Dutch scholar working in Amsterdam. I was happy to realize that what I had always felt in meetings with Fred Landman was more than a personal taste for formal semantics, or some other kind of esoteric interest. It was a school of thought. When I visited the Netherlands later in 1993, I was fortunate enough to also meet Jeroen, Theo and Remko. Meeting them in person and hearing them talk only strengthened my initial impression about the field. Here I'm trying to describe it, but in good mornings, when the sun shines and no pressing academic duty fills my day, I can still feel it in my bones.

By the time I visited the Netherlands in 1993 I had learned some more semantics. One of my main reasons for wanting to do my PhD research here was that I had known some of your works, especially Frank's work on data semantics that I mentioned, Jeroen and Martin's celebrated paper on dynamic predicate logic, Remko's seminal paper on plurals and Theo's unbelievably thorough work on Montague Grammar. It also didn't hurt that Nissim Francez and the late Tanya Reinhart always kept telling me: "Yes, it is definitely the place for you! These are surely the people you should like to work with!". In more general terms, I was attracted to the long Dutch tradition of combining Logic and Linguistics, which in the mornings that I mentioned I see thriving in this country. What first struck me when meeting you and other Dutch semanticists – by now it almost looks like an obvious fact – was to see how informal these formal guys are: how easy it is to talk to them, and how hard it is to get them satisfied with half-baked ideas. Years later, when Remko and Theo came to my promotion ceremony in Utrecht, I had a unique sense of honor: of being accepted to a club of people who are the least likely to form any club of social artificiality.

What is the transition in semantics that I'm talking about? Why do I think that your retire-

ments mark such a change in the field? One big and noticeable change that we are witnessing in formal semantics these days is the much closer attention to psychological dimensions of natural language semantics beyond that dusty notion of ‘truth’. This transition is reshaping the field in complex ways that I don’t think we can appreciate at the moment. But when looking back on your work, the big domain of knowledge and thought that you have explored, I feel quite confident that what we see in semantics is not a revolution or a paradigm shift but some sort of natural evolution, a change that is bringing Logic, Linguistics and Cognitive Psychology closer together than they have ever been before. Without the huge research project on Logic and Language in which you all have been playing such an important role, this transition might not have ever begun. Logic might have remained a mathematical and philosophical field that has little to do with the systematic analysis of actual utterances in natural language, let alone language acquisition or cognitive neuroscience. Linguistics might have remained without one of its most important parts – the connection between form and meaning. If the evolution that we experience proves successful, it is to a large extent thanks to the foundations of formal reasoning about language that all five of you have laid, each of you in his unique way. The thrill we take in the transition, and in looking back on where the field started and where it is now, is in many ways thanks to all the persistence and wisdom that you have invested in your work.

Please excuse these notes for not trying to do any sort of justice to details of your large body of work. If I tried to do that, I would have surely started my preparations with another request to the editors, which they could not have possibly accepted. I wish, well I know, that you’ll keep doing everything you choose to do in the same vigorous intellectual spirit that has characterized your work so far.

Yours, with appreciation,
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