

Preface

There may seem to be no more abstract and theoretical pursuit than the study of *meaning* itself. There's even no a priori reason why individual 'minds' should be capable of understanding how meaning somehow exists in a world that is - at least according to the more mature science of physics – ultimately atomic in nature. Yet far from feeling alone in a world devoid of meaning, I take it for granted that we strive in a rich social world that is overflowing with undiscovered facets. The Web is the universal method of intertwining and sharing these facets with each other. Representations are the texture of our life on the Web. Even if the task is impossible, the calling is worthwhile. Across the Mediterranean, I find the courage of Egypt contagious as I follow their digital photos and text in my Web browser.

A friend once said that the world is not composed of atoms, it is composed of stories. So this book can be considered the trace of my particular story. The story I am telling in this book is not exactly the story I had hoped to tell as a graduate student. This book is to a large extent a reworked and highly edited version of my thesis, and as such suffers from the problems that any thesis has, namely that the studies it comprises were done as small shots in the dark in order to reveal some aspect of a much more sophisticated question. There is much to be done, like formalizing a computational theory of sense and evaluating such a theory. At the time of writing these studies I did not have access to the Web-scale data-sets or processing power needed to formulate a testable theory of social semantics, and as I sit here in Yahoo! Research, I cannot but be amazed by the fact that I have an entire copy of the Web accessible from my desktop. Looking back, the idea of social semantics came upon me in a visit to Amsterdam when I first arrived in Europe: meaning is not something we possess alone, but something we create together. To this day, I still cannot think of a better way to phrase the hypothesis of social semantics.

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<http://www.springer.com/978-1-4614-1884-9>

Social Semantics

The Search for Meaning on the Web

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2013, XVI, 220 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4614-1884-9