

Toward an Extremely Mental Semantics

(No seriously, this semantics is very mental—possibly *too* mental.)

Daniel W. Harris
Hunter College, CUNY



Three Kinds of Mentalism about Semantics:

1. **Subject-Matter Mentalism**

When we're doing semantics, what we're studying is some aspect of human psychology.

2. **Metasemantic Mentalism**

When an expression's meaning underdetermines what a speaker says with it, this gap is bridged by some fact about the speaker's (or interlocutors') mental states.

3. **Semantic-Value Mentalism**

The semantic values of linguistic expressions are (properties of) mental states.

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(see my paper, "Imperative Inference and Practical Rationality", forthcoming in *Philosophical Studies*)

Some Observations

Observation 1

The semanticists are on to something.

Observation 2

Semantics is better at telling us about the compositional aspects of meaning than the conceptual aspects of meaning.

$$\llbracket \text{all} \rrbracket = \lambda w. \lambda \Phi_{\text{et.}}. \lambda \Psi_{\text{et.}}. (\forall x_e)(\Psi x \supset \Phi x)$$

$$\llbracket \text{dog} \rrbracket = \lambda w_{\text{st.}}. \lambda x_e. x \text{ is a dog at } w$$

(See Michael Glanzberg's recent work.)

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Why be a subject-matter mentalist?

An argument for subject-matter mentalism

1. Semantics should be explanatory, not merely descriptive.
2. In particular, semantics should contribute to an explanation of how we use language to do various things, including how we use language to communicate.
3. In order to be explanatory in this way, semantics has to tell us about something that is causally implicated in the communication process.
4. The only plausible subject matters that meet this criterion are aspects of language users' minds.
5. Therefore, semantics is the study of some aspect of language users' minds.

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On this view, semantics can be explanatory only if the abstract objects in question are idealized models of something psychological.

(Compare other forms of model-based science.)

4. The only plausible subject matters that meet this criterion aspects of language users' minds.

Public Languages/Conventions?

(cf. Lewis, Millikan, Stotts!)

- ▶ On Lewis's view of convention, conventions are just a bunch of mental states.
- ▶ Millikan says that to be conventional is to be the product of a certain kind of selection process. But the only candidate for what has been selected in this case are aspects of our psychology.
- ▶ The grammatical algorithms that semantics actually tells us about don't seem all that public.

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What aspect of human psychology is the subject matter of semantics?

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My answer:

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(See my paper, "Semantics without Semantic Content", *Mind & Language*)

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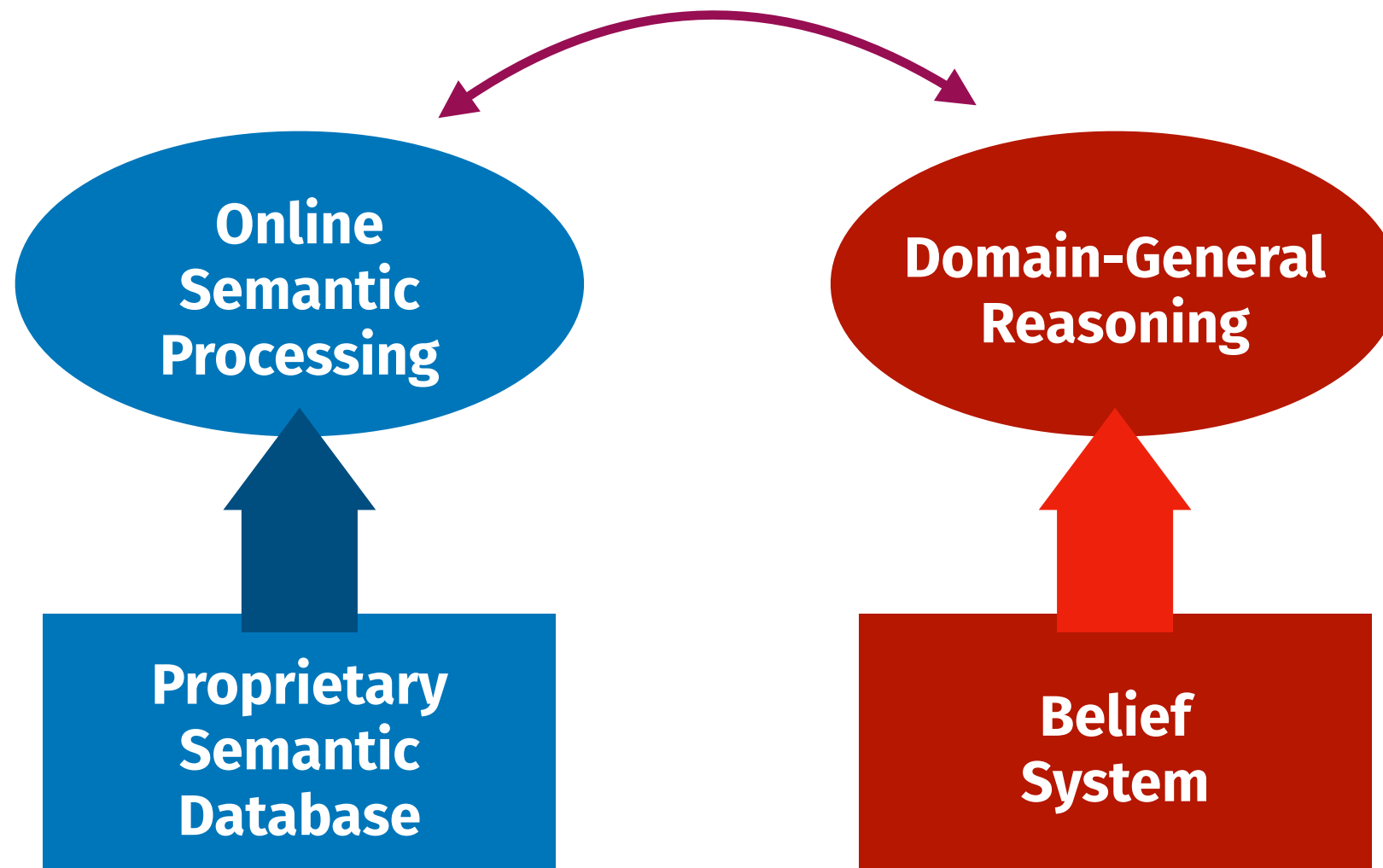
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$$\llbracket \alpha\beta \rrbracket = \llbracket \alpha \rrbracket(\llbracket \beta \rrbracket) \text{ or } \llbracket \beta \rrbracket(\llbracket \alpha \rrbracket) \quad (\text{whichever is defined})$$

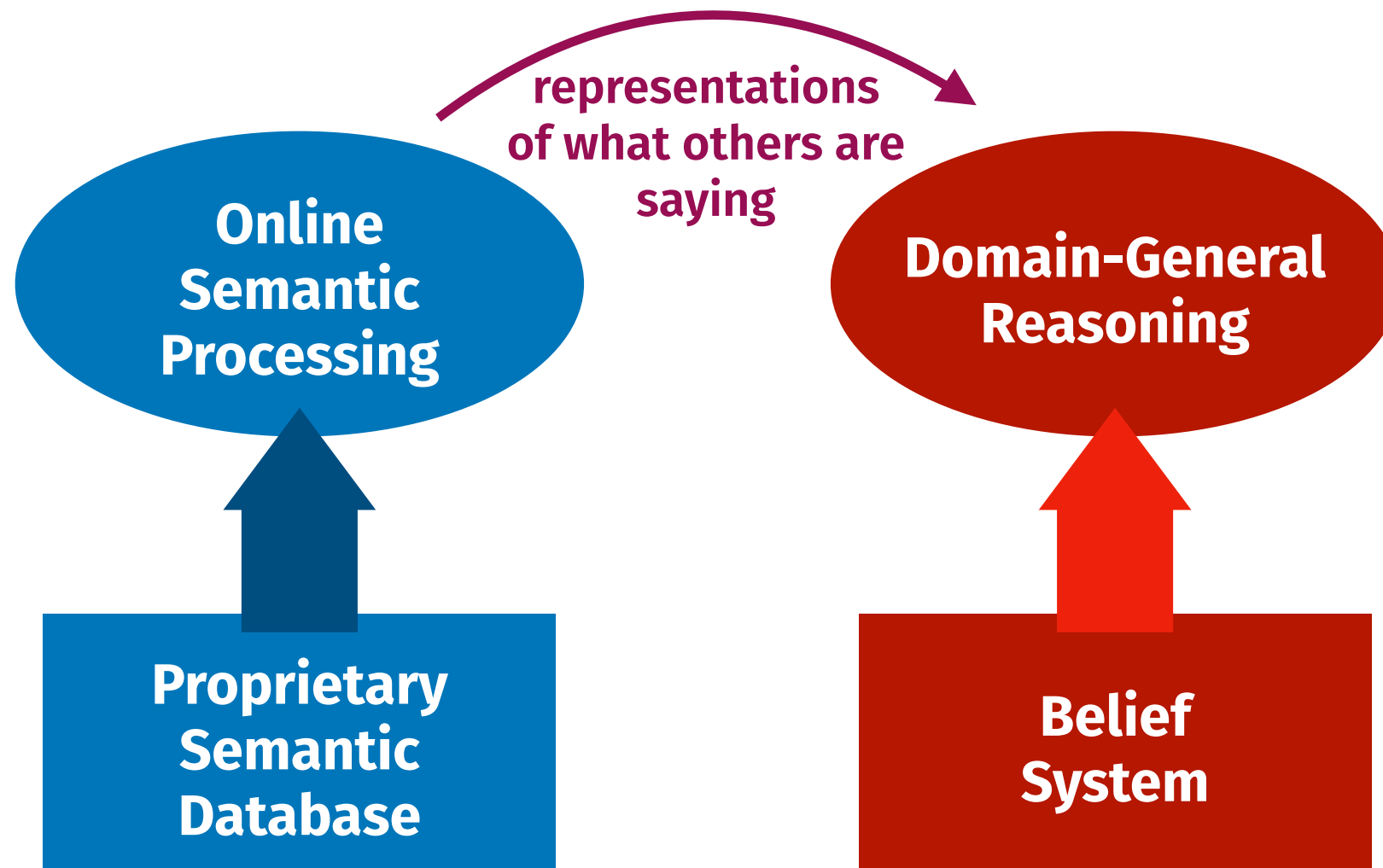
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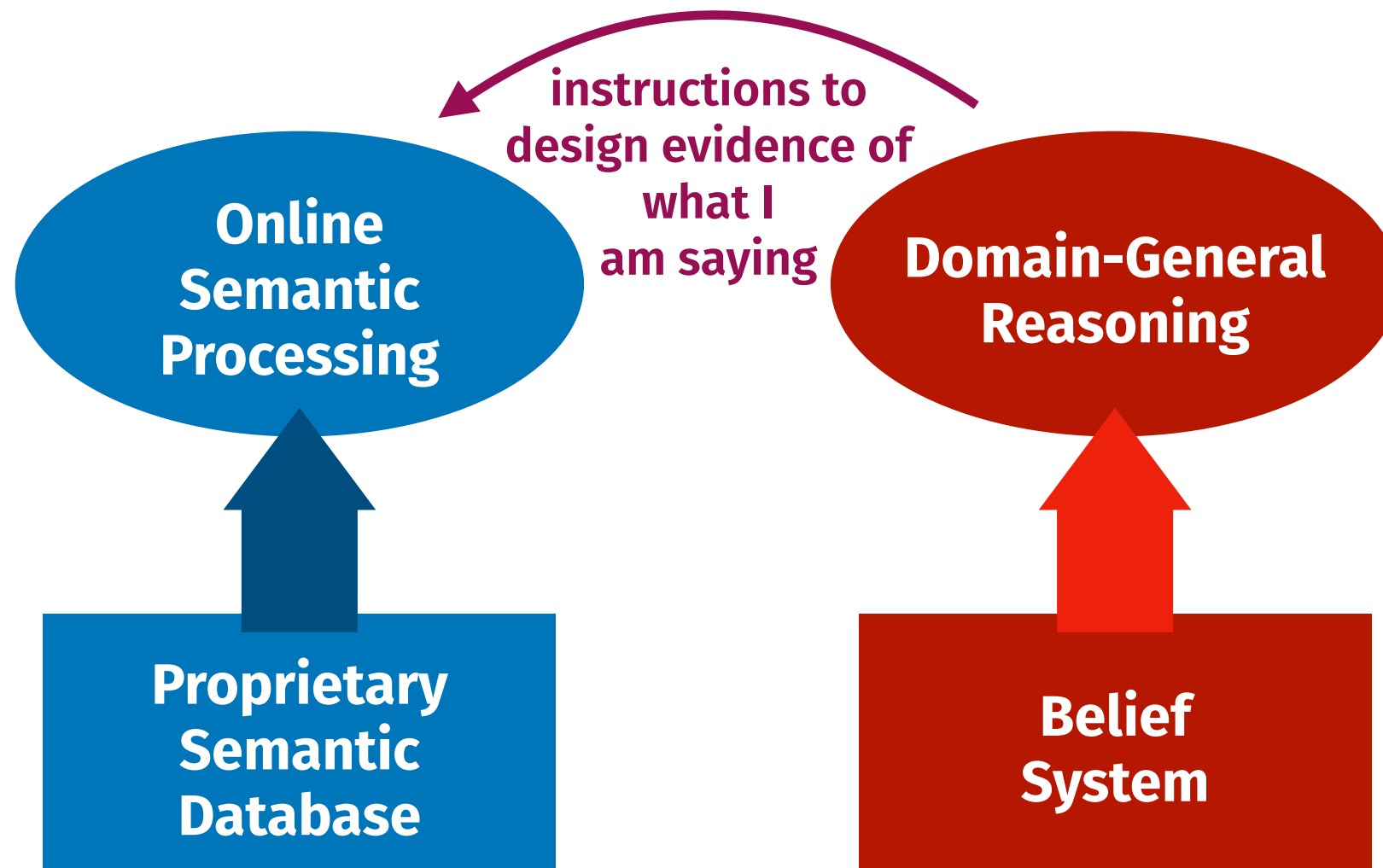
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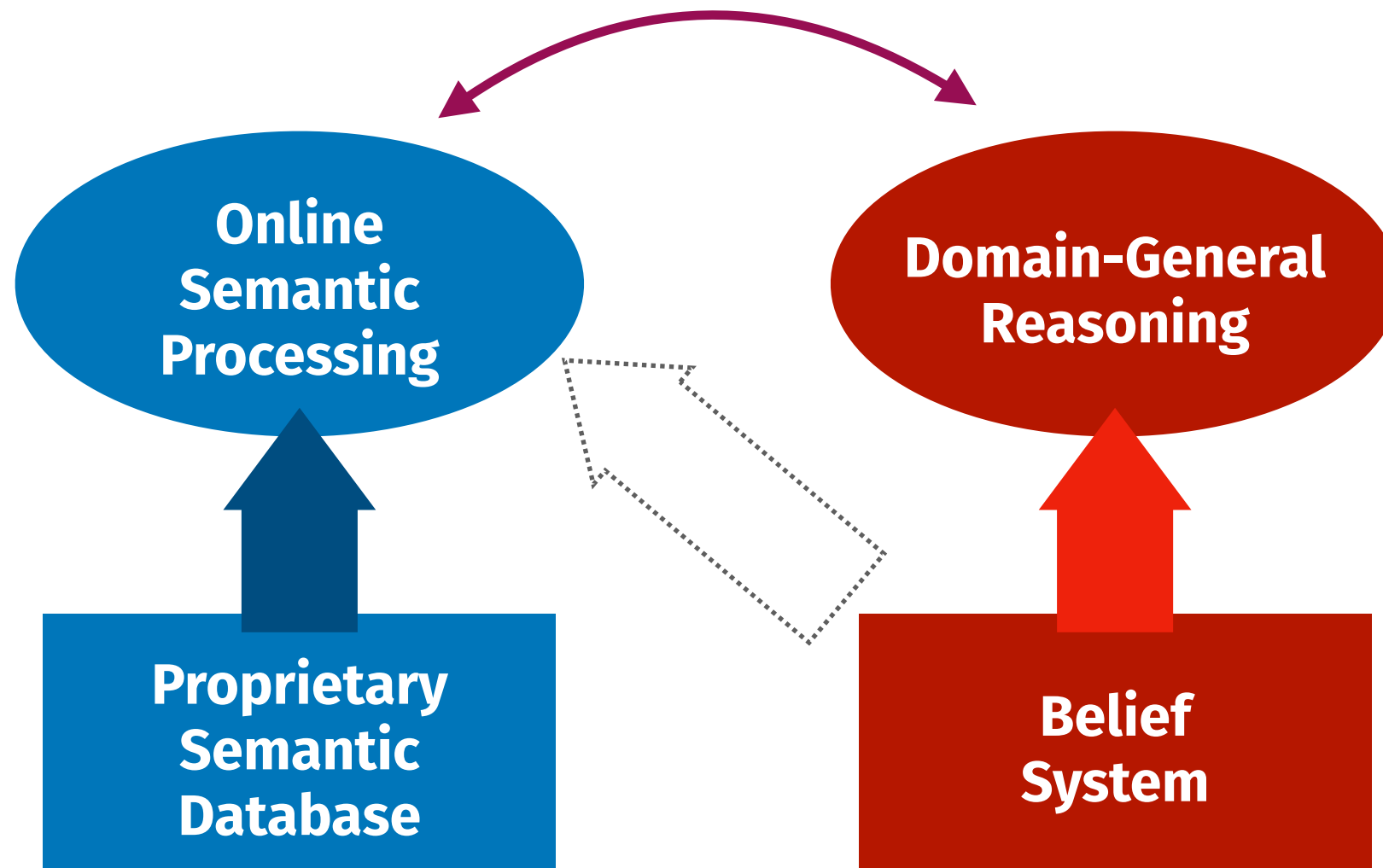
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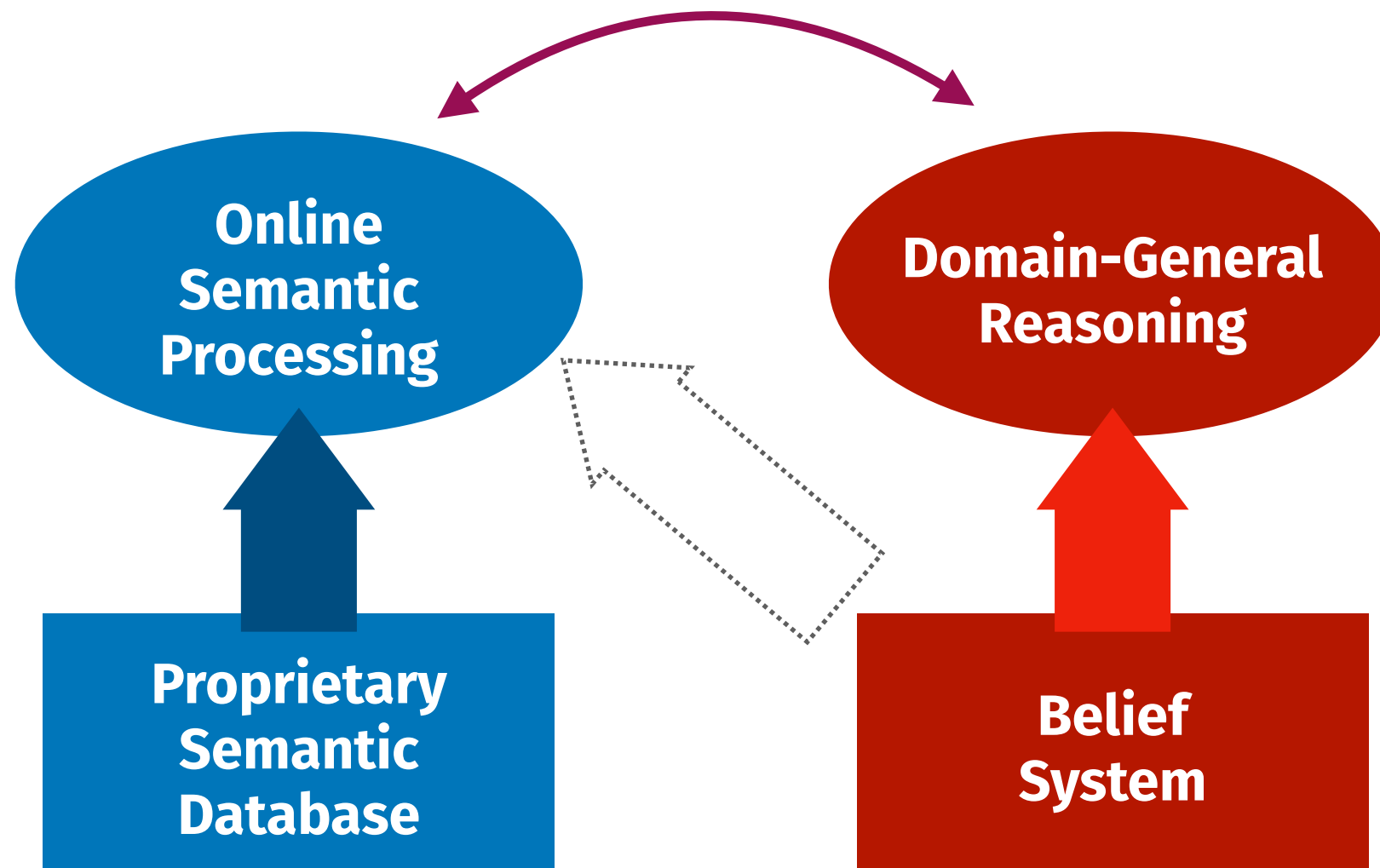
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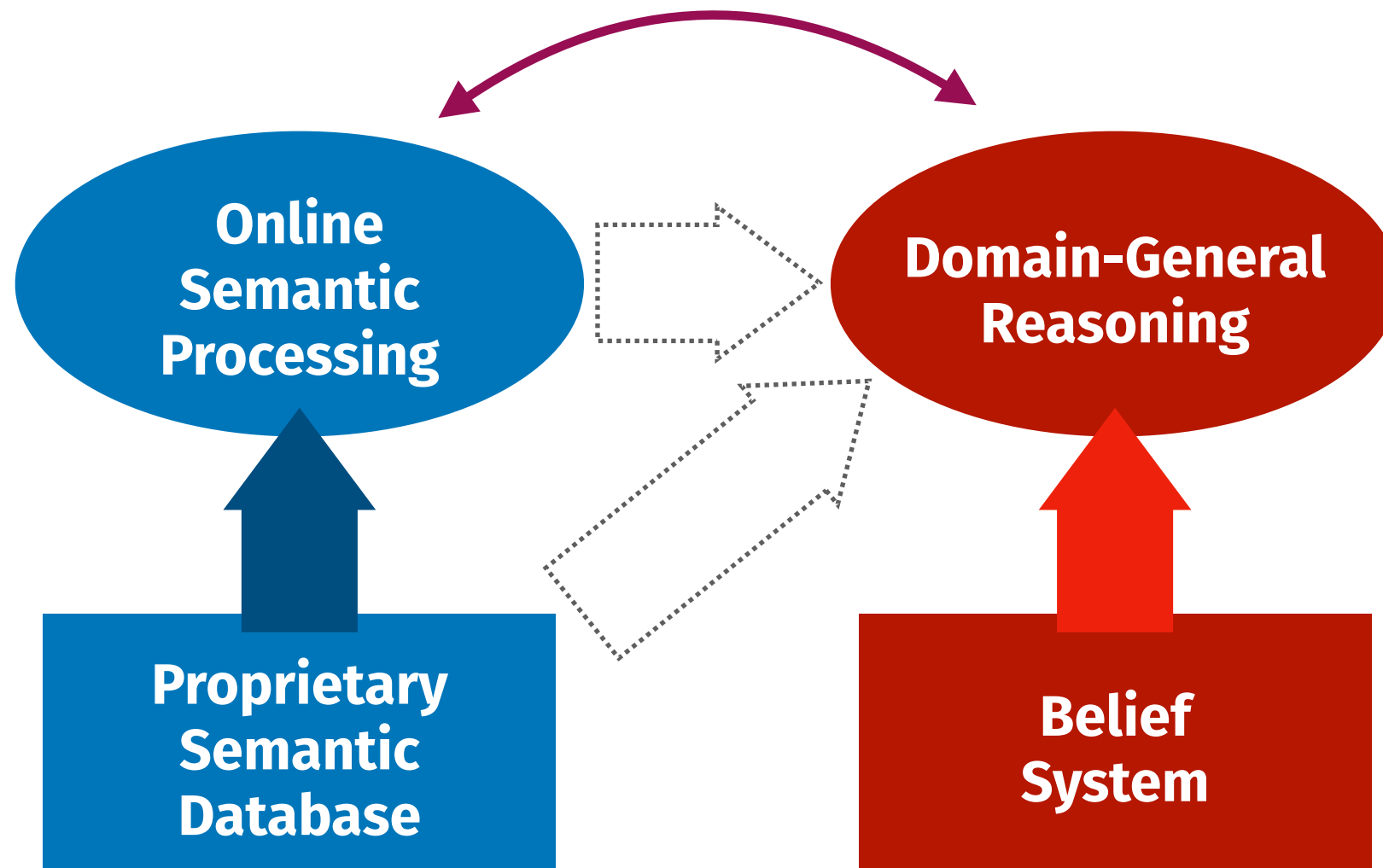


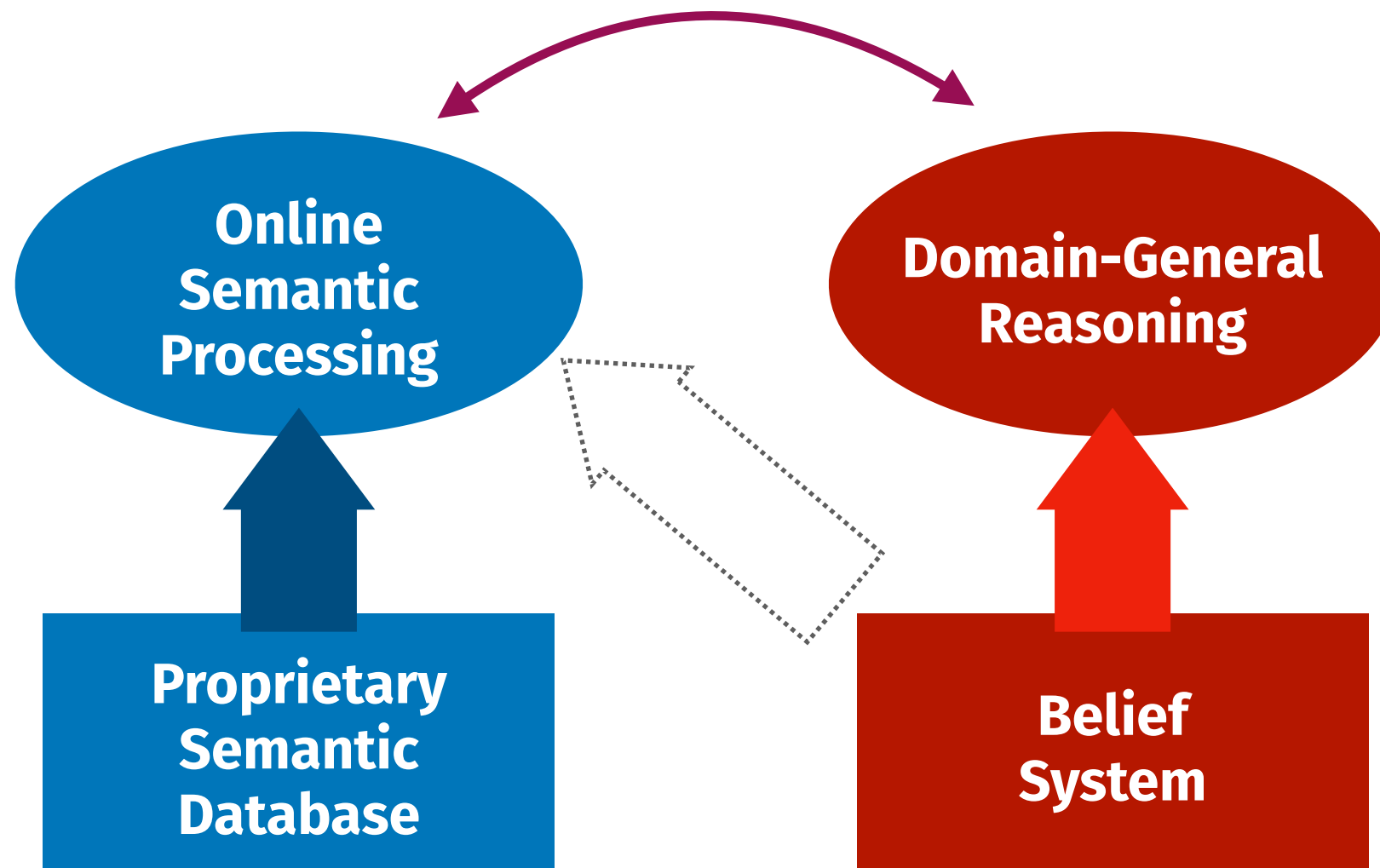
Why encapsulation?

- Semantic illusions
- The idleness of false semantic beliefs

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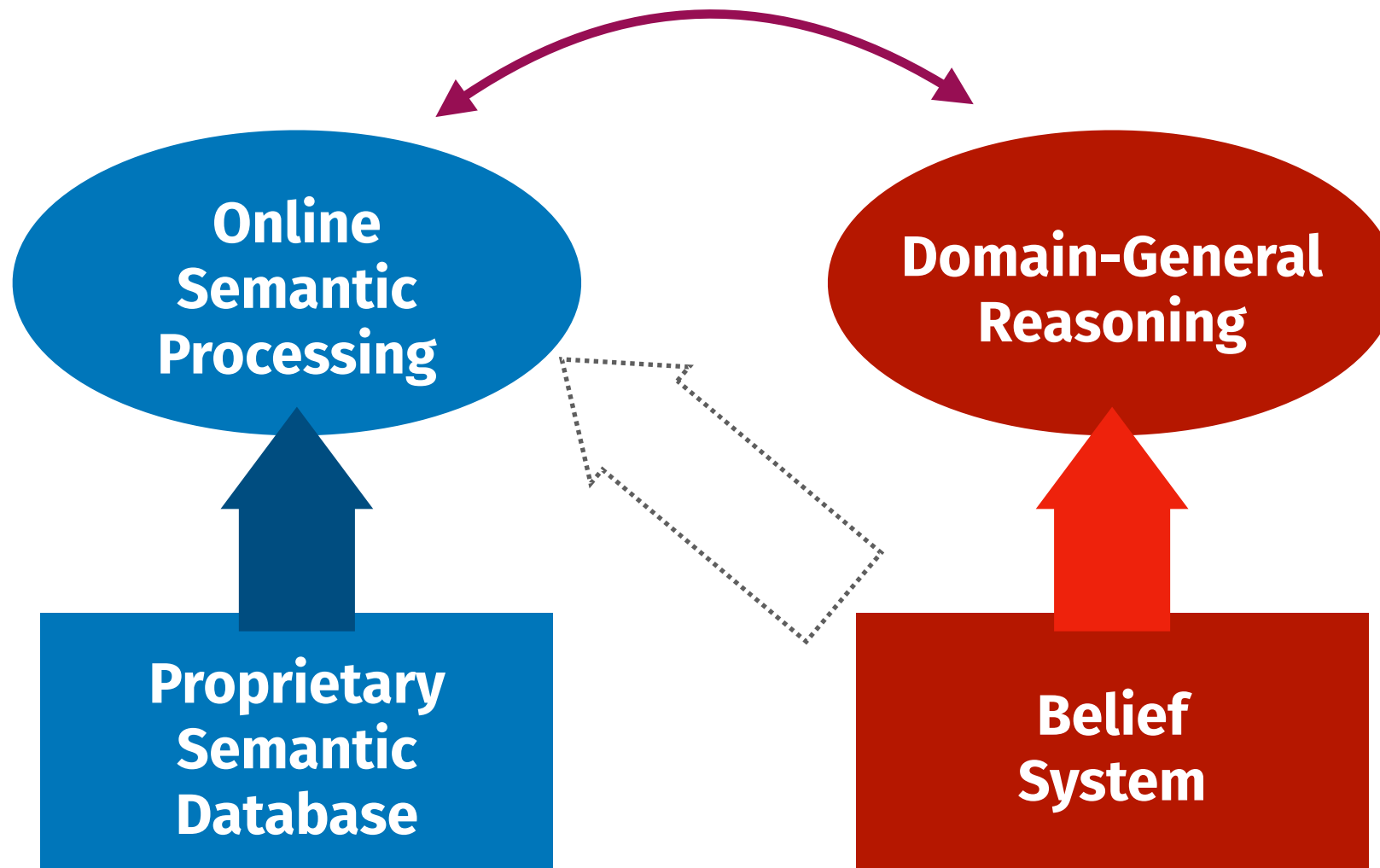
Semantics is the study of the proprietary database of an informationally encapsulated and **centrally inaccessible** system, whose function is to encode and decode evidence about what speakers are saying.





Why inaccessibility?

- ▶ Doing semantics is hard!
- ▶ Most of us don't even have the concepts that would be needed to understand our own semantic competence.



Why inaccessibility?

$[[he_1 \text{ smokes}]]^g = \lambda w_{st}. g(1) \text{ smokes at } w$

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Yes!

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- ▶ The semantic processor doesn't have access to information about extralinguistic context.
- ▶ Therefore semantic values aren't context-relativized contents.
- ▶ They are context-neutral "constraints."

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$[[\text{he smokes}]] = \lambda p_{\langle st,t \rangle} . \exists x : x \text{ is male} : p = \lambda w_{st} . x \text{ smokes at } w$
(the property shared by all propositions that predicate the property of smoking of males)

(See my paper, "Semantics without Semantic Content", *Mind & Language*)

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notice what's not here



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**Okay, so why does metasemantic
mentalism follow from all of this?**

A standard way of framing metasemantics:

“Which facts about context fix the contents of context-sensitive expressions? Speakers’ intentions, common ground, something “objective,” or something else?”

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“Which facts about context fix the contents of context-sensitive expressions? Speakers’ intentions, common ground, something “objective,” or something else?”

Given my version of subject-matter mentalism, this question has false presuppositions!

- There are no “context-sensitive expressions.”
- Semantically underspecified expressions (all open-class lexical items?) don’t have contents at all.
- Their meanings give partial (and defeasible) evidence of what speakers are saying with them.

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- There is a true reading of this claim, on my view:
- When a speaker uses a semantically underdetermined expression, like “he,” they give partial evidence of what they are saying.
- The hearer has to infer the rest.
- If what the speaker says is determined by their intentions (or by common ground), then this inference is a kind of mindreading.

INTENTION RECOGNITION

(cf. Grice 1957, 1969)

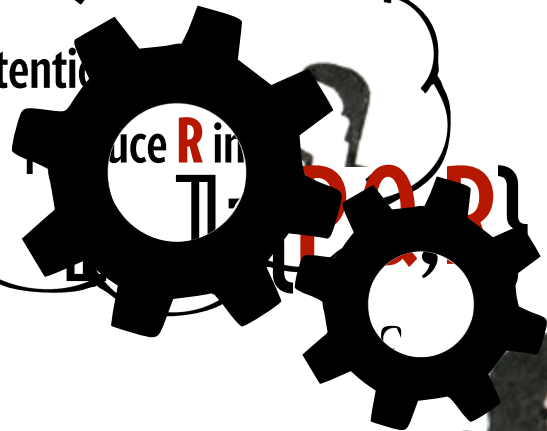
(1) Intention to produce **R** in 

(2) Intention for  to recognize
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U

Intention

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INTENTION RECOGNITION

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him

[[him]] =

Ben Franklin?
Don Draper?
Eric Trump?
Plato?
⋮



Objection:

**Won't somebody
please think of the
intuitions!!!???**



Context: We are having a conversation about basketball, and there are lots of professional basketball players around, who range from 6'2" to 7'0". Unbeknownst to you, I am bored by basketball and obsessed with horseback riding, and I am thinking about jockeys, who are rarely over 5' tall. A man who is 5'3" walks in. I say:

Hmm, he is bit tall.

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1. Intuition: False!
2. But I intended to say that he is a bit tall for a jockey, which is true!
3. Therefore, my intentions don't determine what counts as tall.
4. Common ground won't work either.
5. Therefore we need something non-mental.

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- What is this intuition about?
- Not the semantic content!
- There is no such thing!

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▸ Two options:

1. What the speaker intended to say.

2. What the speaker gave evidence of having said.

(cf. Neale, "This, That, and the Other")

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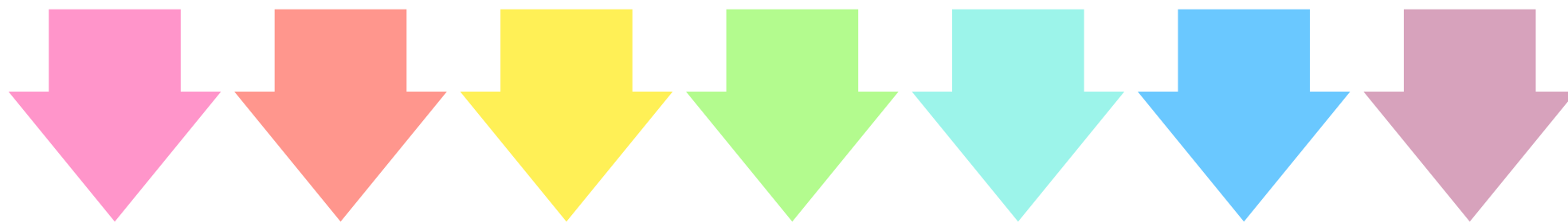
1.5. What was said! →

But what do we need this for?

(cf. Neale, "This, That, and the Other")

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Thanks.