

Mind, Matter, and Language

Review Lecture: Meaning

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Review: Philosophy of Language

Review: Philosophy of Language

Words and sentences in natural languages have a **meaning**.

- To understand a language, you have to know what its expressions mean.
- The meaning of words explains how they are used to
 - convey information
 - ask for directions
 - make promises
 - sentence people to prison
 - etc.

Semantics

What is the meaning of ‘..’?

- What is the meaning of ‘وعث رَمَل سَيَار’?
- What is the meaning of ‘Clark Kent’?
- What is the meaning of ‘nobody’?
- What is the meaning of ‘the present King of France’?
- What is the meaning of ‘Where is Bob?’?

Semantics

What is the meaning of ‘..’?

We sometimes answer this kind of question by giving a *definition* or *translation*.

- ‘neige’ means ‘snow’.
- A polygon is a closed two-dimensional figure consisting of connected straight lines.

But meaning doesn't just connect words with other words.

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‘وعث رمل سيار’ —



‘it’s raining’ —



The referential approach

Words pick out things in the world. The meaning of a word is the thing it picks out.

- The meaning of 'Hesperus' is the planet Venus.
- The meaning of 'Phosphorus' is the planet Venus.
- The meaning of 'water' is the chemical kind water.
- The meaning of 'green' is the colour green.
- ...

The referential approach

Words pick out things in the world. The meaning of a word is the thing it picks out.

Challenges:

- What is the meaning of 'the', 'of', 'nobody', ...?
- What is the meaning of a sentence?
- Names like 'Vulcan' have meaning, but don't pick out anything.
- Co-referring names seem to differ in meaning:
 - 'Hesperus = Phosphorus.'
 - 'Hammurabi believed that Hesperus is visible in the evening sky.'

The referential approach

Words pick out things in the world. The meaning of a word is the thing it picks out.

Popular response:

- The meaning of 'the', 'of', 'nobody' are abstract objects.
- The meaning of a sentence is a list of the meanings of its parts.
- Names like 'Vulcan' have no meaning.
- 'Hesperus = Phosphorus' has the same meaning as 'Hesperus = Hesperus'.
- Speakers associate more with a name than its referent, but these further associations are not part of the name's meaning.

The Fregean approach

Words typically pick out things in the world, but they also represent a way of picking out these things.

- 'Hesperus' *refers to* the planet Venus, and it *presents* this planet as the brightest object in the evening sky.
- 'Phosphorus' *refers to* the planet Venus, and it *presents* this planet as the brightest object in the morning sky.
- 'Hesperus = Phosphorus' differs in meaning from 'Hesperus = Hesperus'.
- 'Vulcan' has no reference, but it has a sense.

The Fregean approach

Words pick out things in the world, but they also represent a way of picking out these things.

Challenges:

- Competent speakers associate different descriptions with the same name.
- Speakers may associate incomplete descriptions with a name.
- Speakers may associate false descriptions with a name.
- When we talk about other possible worlds, names track their referent.

The Fregean approach

Words pick out things in the world, but they also represent a way of picking out these things.

Popular response:

- For proper names, the relevant mode of presentation is usually *the thing I've heard of under the name '...'*
- A name's sense determines what it picks out at our world, but not what it picks out at other possible worlds.
- Most expressions aren't names.

The referential approach is **externalist**:

- Competent speakers usually have at most a partial grasp of what their words mean.
- Competent speakers may not be able to recognize that two words or sentences have the same meaning.

The Fregean approach denies these claims.

Semantics

What is the meaning of '...?'

Meta-Semantics

What makes it the case that this is the meaning of '...?'

The referential approach to semantics is often combined with a causal approach to meta-semantics.

The Causal Theory of Reference

Words are introduced by an act of baptism; later uses of a word inherit their reference from earlier uses.

The meaning of sentences is settled indirectly, through the meaning of their parts.

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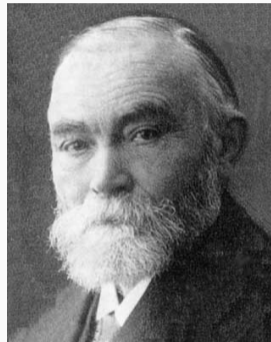
The Fregean approach to semantics is often combined with a conventionalist approach to meta-semantics.

Sentence S means p because there is a convention in the relevant community to utter S only if p .

The meaning of individual words is settled indirectly, through their contribution to the meaning of sentences.

*Never ask for the meaning of a word in isolation,
but only in the context of a sentence.*

Frege, *Foundations of Arithmetic* (1884)



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On conventionalist accounts, the meaning of words is determined by a social practice: by rules for how the words are used.

Wittgenstein suggested that meanings are not just *determined by* social rules, but *are* social rules.

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To explain facts about how language is used, we can combine a **semantics** for the relevant language with a **pragmatics**.

Pragmatics tells us

- which speech acts are performed by uttering a sentence with a given meaning in a given context;
- how utterances affect the social scoreboard;
- what is communicated when a sentence with a given meaning is uttered in a given context;
- ...

The problem of intentionality

The problem of intentionality

The central questions in philosophy of language mirror certain questions in philosophy of mind.

The problem of intentionality

Many psychological states are “about” something.

- I desire a cup of coffee.
- I remember the birth of my first child.
- I believe that Canberra is the capital of Australia.

Such states may or may not be conscious.

The problem of intentionality

Many psychological states are “about” something.

- I desire a cup of coffee.
- I remember the birth of my first child.
- I believe that Canberra is the capital of Australia.

We may ask:

- (1) What is the content of these states?
- (2) What makes it the case that a state has a particular content?

The problem of intentionality

(1) What is the content of a belief, desire, or remembering?

“I desire a cup of coffee”.

- My desire seems to be directed at a *thing*: a cup of coffee.
- But I don't desire any specific cup of coffee.
- Also, I could have this desire even if there were no cups of coffee.
- Also, my desire wouldn't be satisfied if you gave me a certificate of ownership for a cup of coffee.
- Really, what I desire is **that I drink a cup of coffee**.

The problem of intentionality

Subject	Attitude	Proposition
Wolfgang	desire	that Wolfgang drinks a cup of coffee
Antoine	belief	that Wolfgang drinks a cup of coffee
Wolfgang	belief	that Canberra is the capital of Australia
Antoine	belief	that Canberra is the capital of Australia
...

The problem of intentionality

What is the proposition **that Wolfgang drinks a cup of coffee?**

- **The referential approach:** It is a list of things in the world.
- **The Fregean approach:** It is a condition that reflects how the relevant things are presented to the subject.

The problem of intentionality

(2) What makes it the case that a belief or desire (etc.) has a particular content?

The referential approach to intentionality is often combined with a causal answer:

- Our brain stores beliefs and desires in a “language of thought”.
- The words in that language get their meaning through causal relations to things in the world.

The problem of intentionality

(2) What makes it the case that a belief or desire (etc.) has a particular content?

The Fregean approach to intentionality is often combined with an answer that emphasizes use:

- A brain state is a desire for coffee because it plays the characteristic role of such a desire: e.g., it tends to cause behaviour that leads to consumption of coffee.

Summary

- Many sounds, scribbles, and brain states have representational content.
- Some hold that this content is best understood in terms of reference; it comes about through causal contact with the relevant objects in the world.
- Others hold that this content involves a way in which the relevant objects are presented; it comes about through the functional role occupied by a sound, scribble, or brain state.