

Meaning What We Say

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Preface

There are natural languages. Even if what we call a natural language is not a closed system whose borders are clearly demarcated, and even if it keeps on continually changing. Natural languages do indeed exist, because people speak them, because we can buy grammar books that contain all the rules that govern them, and because, in some cases, there are academies and other institutions that take care of them regulating how we should speak and write them. Audacious philosophers may deny the existence of natural languages as integrated wholes and believe only in certain linguistic techniques at the basis of our communicative practices. But even such techniques have something normative or specific which characterizes them as the techniques of a certain linguistic community.

Sets of linguistic techniques can become abstract systems that allow us to talk about things that are not present, events and happenings in the past, events within events, and even imaginary events.

Using linguistic techniques we refer to things, events, and persons, and we describe them saying something that characterizes them. We do it according to certain rules and profiting from established forms and patterns. But it is always the speaking subject, that is: the utterer of words and sentences, who means something even if he or she does it in a non-arbitrary way. It is precisely this tension of subjective meaning

intentions and more or less objective meaning structures that is going to be the guiding perspective of this study about how precisely language functions in our communicative practices.

Individuals or competent speakers use words as sequences of sounds, well-ordered in sentences and with a particular tone of voice, to say something about something. And sciences like phonetics, morphology, semantics, syntax, phonology, and pragmatics study how linguistic meaning activities actually happen at different levels of organization.

1. Meaning What We Say

1.1 Words

One feature of words is that they can be said on their own, in isolation. But when we speak, of course, we do not mark word breaks. Words may have different parts. Those parts are called morphemes. Morphemes are defined as the minimal units of (grammatical or lexical) meaning. Morphemes give us therefore relevant information. They might, for example, tell us the name of a thing or action, or they might tell us how many of something there were or when something happened.

The morpheme with the main (lexical) meaning, the “core” of the word, is called the “root”, “base”, or “stem”. Usually, roots (typically nouns, verbs and adjectives) can occur by themselves, without other morphemes attached. Other morphemes, on the other hand, cannot occur without being attached. They have to be fixed to another morpheme. For this reason they are called “affixes” (“prefixes” if they occur before the main morpheme, “suffixes” if they occur after it, “infixes” if they are inserted within it). “Affixes” are also called “bound” morphemes. In many languages (the so-called agglutinating languages) it is normal to have sequences of morphemes occur within a word. “Affixes” or “bound” morphemes, the ones that cannot stand on their own, provide information about features like the time an event occurred (-ed) or numbers (-s) or they may change the meaning

of a word (un-). But there are also bound roots like “bapt” (“baptize”, “baptism”), “mit” (“submit”, “commit”, “admit”) or “ceive” (“deceive”, “receive”, “conceive”), none of which can appear without additional morphemes added to them.

Traditional grammars group words into classes labelled “parts of speech”. Classes recognized in most grammars are: nouns, pronouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, interjections. In some grammars participles and articles are also listed as separate classes. The definitions given by traditional grammars of the different “parts of speech” are not satisfactory at all. They are vague and not precise enough. To supplement such vague notional definitions, linguists tend today to focus on the structural and functional features that signal the way in which groups of words behave in a language. The English word “round” (an example taken from David Crystal) is a good illustration of why it is sensible to focus on function. “Round” can belong to any of five word classes, depending on the grammatical context. It can function as an adjective (“a round table”), as a preposition (“round the corner”), as a verb (“the yacht will round the buoy soon”), as an adverb (“we walked round to the shop”), and as a noun (“it’s your round”).

1.2 Rules

Words are arranged within sentences according to rules that are called syntactical rules. “Syntaxis” is the Greek word for “arrangement”. Syntactic studies

focus on sentence structure: on the types of words that are constituents of sentences and their order in the sentences they build. The traditional approach to sentences proposes that a sentence has a subject, the topic, and a predicate, that is, what is being said about the topic. This approach works quite well for most sentences. But in some sentences it is not so easy to make such a distinction.

Modern syntacticians analyse sentences looking for groupings within them, that is, for sets of words that hang together. They distinguish several units that are called “noun phrases”, “verb phrases” or “adjective phrases” because their central word is a noun, a verb or an adjective.

Morphemes are used to build words which are used to build phrases which are used to build clauses which are analysed into phrases which are analysed into words which are analysed into morphemes. At each level of analysis a construction is divided into its major constituents. In the sentence “the student could not solve the problem” the noun phrase constituted by the determiner “the” and the noun “student” is distinguished from the verb phrase constituted by the auxiliary verb “could not” and the main verb “solve” and from the noun phrase “the problem” constituted by the determiner “the” and the noun “problem”.

In informal speech, it is sometimes difficult to identify or demarcate clearly sentences, as the units of rhythm and intonation often do not coincide with the

places where full stops would occur in writing. But speech and conversation are also rule-based.

1.3 Grammar

When linguists investigate languages they look for sets of contrasts and rules to build sentences using elementary components. Rules regulate how words are combined and ordered in larger units of meaning, and what kinds of endings and changings are appropriate to indicate, for instance, number and tense. Rule-following in language is practiced spontaneously, without deliberation. But there are in every language implied rules that express true regularities present in factual speech, in what people say or could say.

For Noam Chomsky describing a language is describing structures present in speech. Accordingly, language is for Chomsky a set (finite or infinite) of sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements. Grammar makes explicit how people construct sentences out of words, sentences of various kinds like statements, commands, questions, expressions of desire and so forth. Grammar studies, therefore, how proper names are used in sentences, how (in inflecting languages) certain words are inflected, how prefixes and suffixes are used, how so-called “syncategorematic” words (words that added to other words make them stand for things in a special way) function, how sentences predicate

something of something, and how sentences quantify something among many other things.

Ludwig Wittgenstein brought grammar back onto the philosophical stage. He examined how certain grammatical forms may lead us astray inviting us to create non-existing, fictitious objects grammar would seem to require. Wittgenstein believed that the right way to investigate the grammar of a word or phrase is to remember the circumstances in which it is used correctly and avoid all inadequate uses which can only lead to philosophical errors and misconceptions. Because grammar may deceive us if we use it to solve philosophical problems, a “logical regimentation” of grammatical sentences becomes necessary in order to avoid false ontological commitments and, in general, wrong ways of thinking.

1.4 Logical Regimentation

“Regimenting” means paraphrasing or reformulating something so that we can see what it actually implies. “Logical regimentation” as a setting of grammatical constructions within canonical forms of notation is guided by the principles of simplicity and clarity. Doing it we want to see clearly and in simple, understandable terms what something, a sentence, or an utterance, really means. We do not abandon unregimented language. We may continue to use it. Only in disputed cases we will carry out the operation of regimentation in order to make transparent what is really going on.

Willard Van Orman Quine claims that the best way to regiment grammatical constructions (and in general theories) is to set them in the syntax of classical, two-valued, first-order logic. Logic earns its keep in virtue of the simplicity and clarity that it brings to grammar. The syntax of logic is itself wonderfully clear, simple, and transparent. When grammatical constructions are paraphrased so as to fit into that syntax, they acquire a structure which is equally clear, simple, and transparent. We can then see what such constructions say, and what they do not say. Another advantage of first-order logic is that it carries with it a clear and straightforward criterion of ontological commitment. First-order logic canonical notation should not be envisaged as a device to replace ordinary language, but only as a useful device that enables us to present sentences and utterances in clarified and simplified form. In Quine's own words: "On the whole the canonical systems of logical notation are best seen not as complete notations for discourse on all subjects. There are regimented notations for constructions and for certain of the component terms, but no inventory of allowable terms, nor even a distinction between terms to regard as simple and terms whose structure is to be exhibited in canonical constructions. Embedded in canonical notation in the role of logically simple components there may be terms of ordinary language without limit of verbal complexity. A maxim of shallow analysis prevails: expose no more logical structure than seems useful for the deduction or other inquiry at hand. In the immortal words of Adolf Meyer, where it doesn't itch don't scratch" (Quine, 160).

2. Meaning It

Someone may “mean” something, and something may “mean” something. When someone “means” something, somebody is doing something in order to transmit a message or simply information. When something “means” something, nobody is doing anything. Our words and sentences “mean” something in the natural languages we use to “mean” something. And what we mean using them can be something else from what they normally mean.

In this section I am concerned with meaning as an activity of individuals carried out to produce an effect in a certain audience. When someone uses words and utters sentences he or she does it with a certain intention, trying to do and cause something.

2.1 Using Words and Uttering Sentences

Language appears as a vast collection of different practices. The words and sentences implied do not seem to mean because they denote something, or because they stand in a picturing relation to something external to language (things or facts). Words and sentences seem to mean because people use them and utter them in multiple practices that have something to do with their forms of life. Words and sentences are woven into all human activity and behaviour so that it is not possible to understand them apart from this activity and behaviour. So considered, language is made out of intentions and conventions. What peo-

ple mean and what the words and sentences they say conventionally mean constitute the concrete reality of spoken and written language. Intention and convention presuppose each other. The one cannot work without the other. How the words and sentences are used by the speaker, how what is said is meant by the speaker is just as important as what is said and what the words and sentences said conventionally mean.

H. P. Grice explains how intentions and conventions work together when somebody means something by (or in) uttering a specific conventionally meaningful sentence. Uttering a sentence that conventionally means something, the utterer intends then the uttered sentence to mean something knowing that the sentence has some features recognizable by an audience and assuming that the audience knows that he or she intends to obtain a certain reaction by uttering the specific sentence. Grice's explanation distinguishes utterer's meaning and sentence meaning, thinking sentence meaning to be merely instrumental for the utterer's meaning purposes.

Speaking languages, we use words and sentences to mean something that may be different from what those words and sentences usually mean through conventional regulations. But is the meaning of what we intentionally say exclusively determined by our own subjective intentions and purposes?

2.2 Interacting with People

Utterers and interpreters of words and sentences share knowledge about the world in which they live and in which they have to coordinate their actions. The sentences they use are understandable because they have truth conditions known to utterers and interpreters. Both, utterers and interpreters, know what must be the case in the world if the sentences they use are to be true. The basic situation in which language users are in is masterly described by Donald Davidson: “The basic situation is one that involves two or more creatures simultaneously in interaction with each other and with the world they share; it is what I call triangulation. It is the result of a threefold interaction, an interaction which is twofold from the point of view of each of two agents: each is interacting simultaneously with the world and with the other agent. To put this in a slightly different way, each creature learns to correlate the reactions of other creatures with changes or objects in the world to which it also reacts” (Davidson, 2001, 128).

In such a triangulation words and sentences are uttered and understood on the basis of shared knowledge about the world and the natural language used. Therefore, language as well as thought is necessarily social. Interacting with other people and the world we learn language. Interacting with other people and the world we understand it. Interacting with other people and the world we use it intentionally meaning what we say, and negotiating continually best ways of saying what we mean.

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In what we say subjective meaning intentions come together with meaning structures our natural languages provide.



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