

Lecture 08: Words and Things

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1. Linking Meaning and Reference: Compositionality

Why suppose that sentences have meanings (whatever meanings are)?

Two facts to be explained:

1. If someone utters a sentence and you understand her, then you will likely understand others when they utter that sentence. And conversely.
2. If a sentence is used to communicate something in one situation, then it can typically be used to communicate much the same thing in another situation.

An attempted explanation sketch: There are some things and nearly every sentence is related to a different thing. Communicators often know which thing is related to which sentence. This knowledge (is part of what) enables them to understand utterances of those sentences.

Terminology: Call these things the ‘meanings’ of the sentences.

How is the idea that sentences have meanings related to the idea that utterances refer to things?

Consider two further facts to be explained:

1. *Systematicity* ‘there are definite and predictable patterns among the sentences [utterances of which] we understand’ (Szabó 2004)
2. *Productivity* communicators can understand utterances of an indefinitely large range of sentences we have never heard before.

An attempted explanation sketch:

1. Words have meanings.
2. *Compositionality* The meaning of a sentence (and of any complex expression) is fully determined by its structure and the meanings of its constituent words.

If that this explanation sketch is correct, what are meanings? Proposal 1: the meaning of a word is its referent. Proposal 2: the meaning of a word is its sense.

How is the idea that sentences have meanings related to the idea that utterances refer to things?

2. Knowledge of Reference and Pragmatics

Recall this distinction (Neale 1990; Ludlow & Neale 1991):

1. MS, the meaning of the sentence;

2. PE, the proposition expressed;
3. PM, the proposition meant;
4. SG, the speaker’s grounds for making an utterance.

Q1 Why distinguish PE and PM?

1. (Assumption) MS is a function from contexts of utterances to propositions.
2. Suppose for a contradiction that PMs were the values of this function, i.e. MS + context of utterance yields PM.
3. Then Compositionality would require a systematic relation between the words uttered and PM.
4. (Observation) Substituting words in an utterance can cause PM to vary dramatically, as can what happens after the utterance is over (‘I’ve had a great evening. This wasn’t it’).
5. Therefore: what MS + context of utterance yields is not (always) a PM.

Terminology: Let PE be what MS + context of utterance yields. (Strictly speaking we need context of evaluation too, and further complexities; see Speaks (2018).) The above argument shows that PE is distinct from PM.

An utterer's *knowledge of reference* concerning her utterance of 'Earth' is that state of her mind in virtue of which this utterance refers to Earth.

Q2: Why suppose that there is any such thing as knowledge of reference?

Successful communication with words involves specifying a PM to be communicated and selecting words which will communicate this PM to your audience. In successfully selecting the words, you manifest sensitivity to the relations between MS, PE and PM. But the relation between PE and PM is defined in terms of cooperation (Grice) or relevance (Sperber & Wilson); it involves uncodifiable dependence on arbitrary features of the context of utterance. And the only available models of how to get from PM to words involves reasoning about PE, MS and either cooperation or relevance. Therefore, you (or something in you) probably has to represent both MS and PE in order to select words which will communicate the specified PM to your audience

3. Lexical Innovation

"It is a convention of English that 'red' in its most basic, literal sense, is correctly predicated only of things which are red. Speakers of English who are credited with an understanding of 'red' in its most basic and literal sense are thereby credited, inter alia, with the intention to uphold this pattern of predication as a matter of convention"

(Wright 1986, . 220).

"The role of symbols in language is evident: the meaning of a word or phrase is fixed (at least in part) by the conventions or rules that govern its use" (Hookway 2000, p. 98).

"A language is a set of historically evolved social conventions by means of which intentional agents attempt to manipulate one another's attention" (Tomasello 2001, p. 1120).

Lexical innovation is either coining a new word or using an old word to mean something it hasn't already been used to mean.

Malaprop and other forms of lexical innovation are "in the nature of things, atypical cases: if taken as a prototype for linguistic communication, they prompt the formulation of an incoherent theory" (Dummett 1986, p. 472). But see Davidson (1984, 1989, 1991, 1992, 1994).

4. Sense and Descriptions

'all that anyone has been able to think of is that different modes of presentation [i.e. senses] are a matter of different descriptions being associated with the signs. Some other views have been tried, such as those that say all uses of co-referential terms in a single discourse must be anaphorically linked. But these ideas have not been found compelling' (Campbell 2011, p. 340).

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