Lecture 02: Words and Things

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"it is not at all clear that the theory of natural language and its use involves relations of "denotation", "true of", etc., in anything like the sense of the technical theory of meaning … //p. 27// … general issues of intentionality, including those of language use, cannot reasonably be assumed to fall within naturalistic inquiry" (Chomsky 1995, pp. 25–7)

"There is simply no way of making sense of … any of the work in theory of meaning and philosophy of language that relies on such notions" as reference, semantic value, … (Chomsky 1995, p. 49)

1. Acquaintance (Russell's Principle)

'Acquaintance … essentially consists in a relation between the mind and something other than the mind' (Russell 1912, chapter 4)

'we have acquaintance with anything of which we are directly aware, without the intermediary of any process of inference or any knowledge of truths' (Russell 1912, chapter 5)

'knowledge by acquaintance, is essentially simpler than any knowledge of truths, and logically independent of knowledge of truths' (Russell 1912, chapter 5)

The Principle of Acquaintance: 'Every proposition which we can understand must be composed wholly of constituents with which we are acquainted' (Russell 1963, p. 209)

'it is scarcely conceivable that we can make a judgement or entertain a supposition without knowing what it is that we are judging or supposing about. We must attach some meaning to the words we use, if we are to speak significantly and not utter mere noise; and the meaning we attach to our words must be something with which we are acquainted' (Russell 1912, chapter 5)

2. Descriptions

'Thus when, for example, we make a statement about Julius Caesar, it is plain that Julius Caesar himself is not before our minds, since we are not acquainted with him.' (Russell 1912, chapter 5)

'Thus when, for example, we make a statement about Julius Caesar, it is plain that Julius Caesar himself is not before our minds, since we are not acquainted with him. We have in mind some description of Julius Caesar: 'the man who was assassinated on the Ides of March', 'the founder of the Roman Empire', … Thus our statement does not mean quite what it seems to mean, but means something involving, instead of Julius Caesar, some description of him which is composed wholly of particulars and universals with which we are acquainted.' (Russell 1912, chapter 5)

3. Rigid Designators

'Common words, even proper names, are usually really descriptions. That is to say, the thought in the mind of a person using a proper name correctly can generally only be expressed explicitly if we replace the proper name by a description.' (Russell 1963, p. 206)

A rigid designator is an expression that refers to the same individual in every context of evaluation (Kripke 1980, p. 48)

"If 'Moses' means 'the man who did such and such', then, if no one did such and such, Moses didn't exist; … But … we can ask, if we speak of a counterfactual case where no one did indeed do such and such, say, lead the Israelites out of Egypt, does it follow that, in such a situation, Moses wouldn't have existed? It would seem not. For surely Moses might have just decided to spend his days more pleasantly in the Egyptian courts. He might never have gone into politics or religion at all; and in that case maybe no one would have done any of the things that the Bible relates of Moses" (Kripke 1980, p. 58)

4. Knowledge by Description

'we have acquaintance with anything of which we are directly aware, without the intermediary of any process of inference or any knowledge of truths' (Russell 1912, chapter 5)

'We have descriptive knowledge of an object

when we know that it is the object having some property or properties with which we are acquainted; that is to say, when we know that the property or properties in question belong to one object and no more, we are said to have knowledge of that one object by description, whether or not we are acquainted with the object.' (Russell 1963, p. 220)

5. Campbell on Knowledge of Reference

"There is a common-sense picture of the relation between knowledge of reference and pattern of use. On the common-sense picture, your knowledge of reference controls the pattern of use that you make of the term. You use the term the way you do because you know what it stands for. In the later Wittgenstein and in Quine, the problem is that they think the common-sense picture cannot be sustained. There is only the pattern of use: there is no such thing as a knowledge of reference which controls the pattern of use, and to which the pattern of use is responsible. In later Wittgenstein, the form the resulting problem takes is that the pattern of use now seems arbitrary, since it is no longer thought of as controlled by knowledge of reference. This is the issue he confronts in his discussion of rule-following. In Quine, the form the problem takes is that when we have only the pattern of use to consider, we find that it seems to leave under-determined the ascription of meaning to the terms of a language. This is Quine's problem of the indeterminacy of translation. In the ensuing discussion, amazingly, the common-sense picture—that you use the word the way you do because you know what it stands for—is all but lost sight of" (Campbell 2002, p. 4)

'to attribute to a speaker no more than knowledge of how to play ... interlocking language games is to make him a participant in an activity he cannot survey ('cannot see what is going on')' (Dummett 1979, p. 224)

Understanding a word can't be purely a practical ability because this would 'render mysterious our capacity to know whether we are understanding.' (Dummett 1991, p. 93)

Communication by language is 'a rational activity on the part of creatures to whom can be ascribed intention and purpose'.

We can, and should, distinguish 'those regularities of which a language speaker [utterer], acting as a rational agent engaged in conscious, voluntary action, makes use from those that may be hidden from him.' (Dummett 1978, p. 104)

References

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