

# Lecture 09: Words and Things

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## 1. The Normativity of Meaning

‘Whatever its pedigree, and however popular and suggestive it might seem, a slogan it remains.’ (Whiting 2016, p. 221)

“The intention to be taken to mean what one wants to be taken to mean is, it seems to me, so clearly the only aim that is common to all verbal behaviour that it is hard for me to see how anyone can deny it. [This aim] assumes the notion of meaning, [but] it provides a purpose which any speaker must have in speaking, and thus constitutes a norm against which speakers and others can measure the success of their verbal behaviour.” (Davidson 1994, p. 11)

## 2. 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).

Andrea is in her office speaking on the telephone to her friend Ben. As she looks out of the win-

dow, Andrea notices a man on the street below using his mobile phone. He’s not looking where he’s going; he’s about to step out in front of a bus. Andrea does not realise that this man is Ben, the friend she is speaking to. She bangs the window and waves frantically in an attempt to warn the man, but says nothing into the phone. (adapted from Richard 1983, p. 439)

‘Sense is that, sameness of which makes trading on identity legitimate, difference in which means that trading on identity is not legitimate’ (legitimate: that is, knowledge of the premises suffices for knowledge of the conclusion) (Campbell 1997, p. 59).

## 3. Syntax

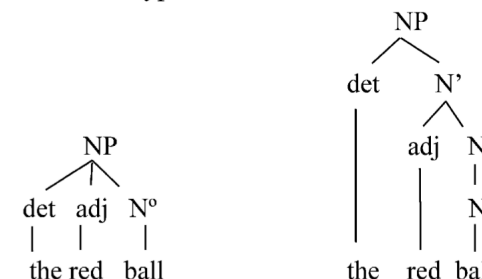
‘A semantic theory for a particular natural language will ... articulate an assignment of meanings to sentences ... It will also display just how the sentences come to have the meanings they do, given their construction out of more basic constituents: it will reveal semantic structure. ... The recurrent contribution that a constituent expression makes to the meanings of several sentences in which it occurs will be revealed in the use of ... the principle assigning a semantic property to that expression ... in the derivations of meaning assignments for all those sentences’ (Davies 1986, p. 130)

*Compositionality* The meaning of a sentence (and of any complex expression) is fully deter-

mined by its structure and the meanings of its constituent words.

Is the syntactic structure of ‘the red ball’ (a) flat or (b) hierarchical?

- a. Flat structure hypothesis    b. Nested structure hypothesis



from Lidz et al. 2003

1. ‘red ball’ is a constituent on (b) but not on (a)
2. anaphoric pronouns can only refer to constituents
3. In the sentence ‘I’ll play with this red ball and you can play with that one.’, the word ‘one’ is an anaphoric pronoun that refers to ‘red ball’ (not just ball). (Lidz et al. 2003; Lidz & Waxman 2004).

## 4. Conclusion

Facts to be explained (in order of appearance):

1. This utterance of ‘Ayesha smells’ depends for its truth on how Ayesha is, unlike that utterance of ‘Beatrice smells’. Why?
2. This utterance of ‘Charly is Charly’ was less revelatory than that utterance of ‘Charly is Samantha’. Why?
3. Humans successfully achieve ends by uttering words. How?
4. Communicators can know, sometimes, whether they are understanding. How?
5. Utterers make rational, voluntary use of some regularities while merely conforming to others. How is this possible?

*The Question:* What is the relation between an utterance of a word (or phrase) and a thing when the utterance refers to the thing?

Terminology: Your *knowledge of reference* of your utterance of ‘Ayesha’ is that mental state, whatever it is, in virtue of which your utterance refers to Ayesha.

Why think there is any such thing as knowledge of reference? Because of two facts which stand in need of explanation:

1. Communicators can know, sometimes, whether they are understanding.

2. Utterers sometimes make rational, voluntary use of some regularities while merely conforming to others.

To explain these facts, we postulate that when either applies, there is knowledge of reference. Your knowledge of reference causes and justifies your utterance of a word or a phrase; and it determines what your utterance refers to.

When the utterance of a word refers to a thing, must the utterer have knowledge of reference?

Maybe not always (we saw an example involving incomplete mastery of a second language). But if you are making rational, voluntary use of some regularities while merely conforming to others, then knowledge of reference is needed. And if you can know whether you are understanding, then knowledge of reference is also needed.

But what could knowledge of reference be? In a limited range of cases, it could be producing or comprehending words guided by knowledge that a thing falls under description.

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