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Theories of meaning in present day Linguistics

The article deals with the theories of meaning in present day Linguistics. They are the referential, ideational and behavioral.

Keywords: linguistics, theory, meaning, the referential, behavioral

В статье рассматриваются теории значения в современной лингвистике, прежде всего референциальная и поведенческая.

Ключевые слова: лингвистика, теория, значение, референциальная теория, поведенческая теория

There are three theories of meaning – the referential, ideational and behavioral. These theories are inadequate or perhaps even downright false, but people have been tempted by them for centuries and it is important to understand why they will not do. If we cannot establish what meaning is, we can least establish some things that it is not.

We have no space here for detailed historical account of the forms in which these theories have been held at different times, but a broad characterization will suffice for our purposes. However, in connection with the different questions about meaning that distinguished in the last section, we should consider a stronger and weaker form of each theory. Let us begin with the stronger form, in which these theories are identity theories. The meaning of an expression is said to be what the expression refers to or the idea associated with it in a person's mind or the stimuli which elicit utterances of it and or the behavioral responses it evokes. In this form these theories are intended as answers to the second question, the question about what meaning really is. They answer it by identifying meaning with something else. The desire to make this move is understandable, especially when what meaning is identified with is something relatively familiar and unproblematic.

The meaning of an expression, for example of the word *apple*, has often seen to be something abstract, obscure and mysterious. But if the meaning of a word can be identified with what the word refers to the meaning of *apple* will be no more obscure or mysterious than apples themselves. A similar demystification of meaning should follow from its identification with observable, measurable sensory stimuli and behavioral responses. Even if meaning are identified with ideas, something seems to be gained, for though ideas themselves obscure entities they are at least something

which scientists, psychologists, are concerned to describe; the problem of meaning is thus reduced to another familiar problem [1, c. 89].

But whatever the temptation, these identifications are untenable. Meanings are not apples. Apples can be eaten but meanings cannot: meanings can be learned but apples cannot; the meaning of *apple core* contains, in some intuitive sense, the meaning of *apple*, but apples core do not contain apples. And meanings are also not stimuli or responses. An utterance of the expression *Help!* is typically provoked by danger of some kind and the typical or at least charitable, response is to rush to the aid of the speaker. But the meaning of *Help!* is not danger or being in danger or a rescue mission. Danger can be mild or acute, the rescue of someone in danger can be willing or reluctant, but meanings can be none of these. Similarly, the meaning of a word can be charming or vile, clever or silly, stable or fleeting, but the meaning of a word does not have these properties.

These theories thus do not give correct answers to the question of what meaning is. But they might nevertheless at least specify the identity conditions of meaning, i.e., tell us when the meaning of two expressions will be identical and when they will be different. This would be a partial answer to the first kind of question about meaning that we distinguished; that is, it would be a contribution to a descriptive account of the semantic properties and relations that expressions exhibit. It would undeniably be retreat, for if ideas, for example, determine the identity conditions on meanings without actually being meanings, we can still wonder what meanings are and why they correlate with ideas in this fashion. Though identity is too strong a relation to posit between ideas and meanings, mere accidental correlation would be quite unrevealing. However, a principled connection could perhaps be established indirectly; we might say, for example, that to know the meaning of the word is to have a certain idea associated with it or on the behavioral theory, that to know the meaning of a word is to be conditioned to respond to utterances of it in a certain fashion. So developed, these theories of meaning would have some bearing on our third question about how meanings relate to speakers and the world.

The morning star and this book are at least expressions of the kind that can be used to refer, even though their referents do not in fact cover with their meanings. But there is a vast range of perfectly meaningful linguistic expressions that cannot plausibly be said to refer to all. Even a noun like *book* presents problems. *This book* can be used to refer to a book, but *book* by itself cannot. Its connection with reference is that it can be combined with certain other elements to form noun phrases which do have referents, but this is a different from saying that book it self has a referent. So even common nouns like book seem to demand a significant weakening of the basic tenet of this theory, that an expression has a meaning if and only if it has a referent.

A standard response to this problem has been to say that the referent of the common noun book is the set of all books. If this move is made, additional principles

must be given to explain why the set of all books is not what is referred to by noun phrases *like this book, your books, and few books*. But these principles will of course, require an account of the meaning of the words this, your and few in such phrases and it is far from clear that the meaning of these words can be captured by appeal to their referents. It takes even more ingenuity to fit verbs, adverbs, propositions, conjunctions and the like into referential mold. Verbs might be implicitly nominalized; we might say, for example, that the meaning of *knit under* or *not*? Any candidates for the referents of these words will be at least as obscure and even more dubious than meanings themselves.

As has often been observed the paradigm examples for referential theory of meaning are proper names, which by no accident at all, are words that can stand alone as noun phrases do have referents. All that needs or can be said about name of a certain city. The program is then to assimilate all words and expressions to names like Rome, but it is very serious program. For what is characteristic of proper names is precisely that they have no means. (Some names, for example, London bridge, to develop out meaningful expressions, but the more they function like names the less relevant their meanings are; London Bridge did not change its name when it was moved to Arizona.) A theory of meaning based on expressions that have no meaning would certainly, if it succeeded, make short work of puzzles about meaning, but it could hardly be expected to succeed [2, c. 52].

Let us now consider whether ideas provide identity conditions on meanings. What suggests this theory is something like the following. I have a thought or an idea, I formulated a sentences, I utter it to you, and when you hear it you come to have the same thought as me. This may be a crude picture of the way language is used but it is not an obviously false one. As a theory of meaning it says that an expression has a meaning if and only if it is associated with some idea and that two expressions have the same meaning if and only if they are associated with the same idea. Notice how this avoids the defects of the referential theory: the morning star is identical with the evening star, but an idea of the morning star need not be identical with an idea of the evening star.

The truth of ideational theory inevitably depends on what ideas are taken to be and how the associative relation between expressions and idea is defined. But the identical approach to meaning has traditionally been combined with a very simplistic notion of ideas as mental picture or images as such it is simply false. Mental imagery is shifting arbitrary and differs both in extent and kind from person to person and from occasion to occasion. On one day the word *tablecloth* may conjure up in me the depressing thought of the laundry that needs to be done, on another it make me think of elderly aunt who sends the same gift every Christmas, for someone else *tablecloth* may be associated with a party game and yet another person may have no image associated with it at all. There simply is no stable correlation between imagery and the

meanings of expressions heard or uttered. And there are probably no images at all which would serve to explicate the meaning of words like *how, despite, to.*

For an ideational theory to be plausible it would therefore have to be integrated with a much more sophisticated idea, one which is applicable to all types of expression and which is not at the mercy of the vagaries of mental imagery. But as we refine the theory in this direction it becomes more and more doubtful that we have a theory at all. Since there is o mental picture or image standard associated with the word *how,* we posit some more abstract kind of idea associated with it. But how do we identify this idea? Is there really any way of specifying it other than as that idea present in the mind of a person understanding or meaningfully using the word *how?* At worst this specification would be empty, if there is nothing that meets this description; at best it would be circular, since it defines ideas in terms of understanding and hence of meaning.

We might try giving a more sophisticated account of the modes of combination of ideas into complex one than the traditional empiricist theories provided. Then, perhaps we could say that *how* has meaning not by virtue of being associated with some particular idea but by virtue of its contribution to complex ideas associated with expressions in which *how* occurs. But again, we have no way of characterizing these complex ideas and no way of characterizing the contribution that *how* makes to them. And again this raises the deeper worry that our inability to identify the ideas that would explicate meaning is not simply a matter of the practical inaccessibility of ideas or the lack of an adequate psychological theory, but of the need to refer to the identify conditions on the meaning of the linguistic expressions in giving the identify conditions on ideas. If this is so, meanings may serve to identify ideas but ideas cannot serve to identify meaning.

Finally let us consider behavioral theories of meaning. Since ideas seem to be as ungraspable as meanings themselves, many philosophers and psychologists (and until recently many linguists, e.g., Bloomfield) have eschewed all talks of ideas and mental processes in favor of talk about physical stimuli and behavioral responses to them [3, c. 102]. The meaning of an expression is said to be the stimulus that evokes its utterance, and/or the response, which it elicits from the hearer. This cannot serve as an account of which expressions have meaning, for nonsense is presumably evoked by a stimulus and elicits a response as much as any meaningful expression is and does. But the theory does predict that two expressions mean the same if they are evoked by the same stimuli and elicit the same responses.

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