

I Introduction: meaning and reference

Overview

That certain kinds of marks and noises have *meanings*, and that we human beings grasp those meanings without even thinking about it, are very striking facts. A philosophical theory of meaning should explain what it is for a string of marks or noises to be meaningful and, more particularly, what it is in virtue of which the string has the distinctive meaning it does. The theory should also explain how it is possible for human beings to produce and to understand meaningful utterances and to do that so effortlessly.

A widespread idea about meaning is that words and more complex linguistic expressions have their meanings by standing for things in the world. Though commonsensical and at first attractive, this Referential Theory of meaning is fairly easily shown to be inadequate. For one thing, comparatively few words do actually stand for things in the world. For another, if all words were like proper names, serving just to pick out individual things, we would not be able to form grammatical sentences in the first place.

Meaning and understanding

Not many people know that, in 1931, Adolf Hitler made a visit to the United States, in the course of which he did some sightseeing, had a brief affair with a lady named Maxine in Keokuk, Iowa, tried peyote (which caused him to hallucinate hordes of frogs and toads wearing little boots and singing the *Horst Wessel Lied*), infiltrated a munitions plant near Detroit, met secretly with Vice-President Curtis regarding sealskin futures, and invented the electric can opener.

There is a good reason why not many people know all that: none of it is true. But the remarkable thing is that just now, as you read through my opening sentence—let us call it sentence (1)—you *understood* it perfectly, whether or not you were ready to accept it, and you did so without the slightest conscious effort.

Remarkable, I said. It probably does not strike you as remarkable or surprising, even now that you have noticed it. You are entirely used to reading words and sentences and understanding them at sight, and you find it nearly

2 Philosophy of Language

as natural as breathing or eating or walking. But how did you understand sentence (1)? Not by having seen it before; I am certain that never in the history of the universe has anyone ever written or uttered that particular sentence, until I did. Nor did you understand (1) by having seen a very similar sentence, since I doubt that anyone has ever produced a sentence even remotely similar to (1).

You may say that you understood (1) because you speak English and (1) is an English sentence. That is true so far as it goes, but it only pushes the mystery to arm's length. How is it that you are able to "speak English," given that speaking English involves being able to produce and understand, not only elementary expressions like "I'm thirsty," "Shut up," and "More gravy," but novel sentences as complex as (1)? That ability is *truly amazing*, and much harder to explain than how you breathe or how you eat or how you walk, each of which abilities is already well understood by physiologists.

One clue is fairly obvious upon reflection: (1) is a string of words, English words, that you understand individually. So it seems that you understand (1) because you understand the words that occur in (1) and you understand something about how they are strung together. As we shall see, that is an important fact, but for now it is only suggestive.

So far we have been talking about a human ability, to produce and understand speech. But consider linguistic expressions themselves, as objects of study in their own right.

(2) w gfjsdkhj jiofbglglf ud

(3) It's dangerous to splash gasoline around your living room.

(4) Good of off primly the a the the why.

(1)–(4) are all strings of marks (or of noises, if uttered aloud). But they differ dramatically from each other: (1) and (3) are meaningful sentences, while (2) and (4) are gibberish. (4) differs from (2) in containing individually meaningful English words, but the words are not linked together in such a way as to make a sentence, and collectively they do not mean anything at all.

Certain sequences of noises or marks, then, have a feature that is both scarce in nature and urgently in need of explanation: that of *meaning something*. And each of those strings has the more specific property of meaning something in particular. For example, (3) means that it is dangerous to splash gasoline around your living room.

So our philosophical study of language begins with the following data.

- Some strings of marks or noises are *meaningful sentences*.
- Each meaningful sentence has parts that are themselves meaningful.
- Each meaningful sentence means something in particular.

- Competent speakers of a language are able to understand many of that language's sentences, without effort and almost instantaneously; they also produce sentences, in the same way.

And these data all need explaining. In virtue of what is any sequence of marks or noises meaningful? In virtue of what does such a string mean what it distinctively does? And how, again, are human beings able to understand and produce appropriate meaningful speech?

The Referential Theory

There is an attractive and commonsensical explanation of all the foregoing facts—so attractive that most of us think of it by the time we are ten or eleven years old. The idea is that linguistic expressions have the meanings they do because they *stand for things*; what they mean is what they stand for. On this view, words are like labels; they are symbols that represent, designate, name, denote or refer to items in the world: the name “Adolf Hitler” denotes (the person) Hitler; the noun “dog” refers to dogs, as do the French “*chien*” and the German “*Hund*.” The sentence “The cat sat on the mat” represents some cat’s sitting on some mat, presumably in virtue of “The cat” designating that cat, “the mat” designating the mat in question, and “sat on” denoting (if you like) the relation of sitting on. Sentences thus mirror the states of affairs they describe, and that is how they get to mean those things. For the most part, of course, words are *arbitrarily* associated with the things they refer to; someone simply decided that Hitler was to be called “Adolf,” and the inscription or sound “dog” could have been used to mean anything.

This Referential Theory of Linguistic Meaning would explain the significance of all expressions in terms of their having been conventionally associated with things or states of affairs in the world, and it would explain a human being’s understanding a sentence in terms of that person’s knowing what the sentence’s component words refer to. It is a natural and appealing view. Indeed it may seem obviously correct, at least so far as it goes. And one would have a hard time denying that reference or naming is our cleanest-cut and most familiar relation between a word and the world. Yet, when examined, the Referential Theory very soon runs into serious objections.

OBJECTION 1

Not every word does name or denote any actual object.

First, there are the *names* of nonexistent items like Pegasus or the Easter Bunny. “Pegasus” does not denote anything, because there is in reality no winged horse for it to denote. (We shall discuss such names at some length in chapter 3.) Or consider pronouns of quantification, as in:

- (5) I saw nobody.

It would be a tired joke to take “nobody” as a name and respond, “You must have very good eyesight, then.” (Lewis Carroll: “Who did you pass on the road?” . . . “Nobody” . . . “. . . So of course nobody walks slower than you.”¹ And e. e. cummings’ poem “anyone lived in a pretty how town”² makes little sense to the reader until s/he figures out that cummings is perversely using expressions like “anyone” and “noone” as names of individual persons.)

Second, consider a simple subject–predicate sentence:

(6) Ralph is fat.

Though “Ralph” may name a person, what does “fat” name or denote? Not an individual. Certainly it does not name Ralph, but describes or characterizes him (fairly or no).

We might suggest that “fat” denotes something abstract; for example, it and other adjectives might be said to refer to *qualities* (or “properties,” “attributes,” “features,” “characteristics,” and the like) of things. “Fat” might be said to name fatness in the abstract, or as Plato would have called it, The Fat Itself. Perhaps what (6) says is that Ralph has or exemplifies or is an instance of the quality fatness. On that interpretation, “is fat” would mean “has fatness.” But then, if we try to think of subject–predicate meaning as a matter of concatenating the name of a property with the name of an individual using the copula “is,” we would need a second abstract entity for the “is” to stand for, say the relation of “having,” as in the individual’s having the property. But that would in turn make (6) mean something like, “Ralph bears the having relation to fatness,” and so we would need a third abstract entity to relate the new “bears” relation to the original individual, relation and property, and so on—and on, and on, forever and ever. (The infinite regress here was pointed out by Bradley 1930: 17–18.)

Third, there are words that grammatically are nouns but do not, intuitively, name either individual things or kinds of things—not even nonexistent “things” or abstract items such as qualities. Quine (1960) gives the examples of “sake,” “behalf,” and “dint.” One sometimes does something for someone else’s sake or on that person’s behalf, but not as if a sake or a behalf were a kind of object the beneficiary led around on a leash. Or one achieves something by dint of hard work; but a dint is not a thing or kind of thing. (I have never been sure what a “whit” or a “cahoot” is.) Despite being nouns, words like these surely do not have their meanings by referring to particular kinds of objects. They seem to have meaning only by dint of occurring in longer constructions. By themselves they barely can be said to mean anything at all, though they are words, and *meaningful* words at that.

Fourth, many parts of speech other than nouns do not even seem to refer to things of any sort or in any way at all: “very,” “of,” “and,” “the,” “a,” “yes,” and, for that matter, “hey” and “alas.” Yet of course such words are meaningful and occur in sentences that any competent speaker of English understands.

(Not everyone is convinced that the Referential Theory is so decisively refuted, even in regard to that last group of the most clearly nonreferential words there are. In fact, Richard Montague (1960) set out to construct a very sophisticated, highly technical theory in which even words like those *are* assigned referents of a highly abstract sort, and do have a meaning, at least in part, by referring to what they supposedly refer to. We shall say more of Montague's system in chapter 10.)

OBJECTION 2

According to the Referential Theory, a sentence is a list of names. But a mere list of names does not say anything.

(7) Fred Martha Irving Phyllis

cannot be used to assert anything, even if Martha or Irving is an abstract entity rather than a physical object. One might suppose that if the name of an individual is concatenated with the name of a quality, as in

(8) Ralph fatness

the resulting string would have normal subject–predicate meaning, say that Ralph is fat. (Early in his career, Bertrand Russell suggested that, by writing down a list of names for the right sorts of things in the right order, one would form the collective name of a *state of affairs*.) But in fact (8) is ungrammatical. For it to take on normal subject–predicate meaning, a verb would have to be inserted:

(9) Ralph {has/exemplifies} fatness

which would launch Bradley's regress again.

OBJECTION 3

As we shall see and discuss in the next two chapters, there are specific linguistic phenomena that seem to show that there is more to meaning than reference. In particular, coreferring terms are often not synonymous; that is, two terms can share their referent but differ in meaning—"Joseph Ratzinger" and "the Pope," for example.

It looks as though we should conclude that there must be at least one way of being a meaningful expression other than by naming something, possibly even for some expressions that do name things. There are a number of theories of meaning that surpass the Referential Theory, even though each theory faces difficulties of its own. We shall look at some of the theories and their besetting difficulties in Part II. But first, in the next three chapters, we shall look further into the nature of naming, referring, and the like, in part

because, despite the failings of the Referential Theory of Meaning, reference remains important in its own right, and in part because a discussion of reference will help us introduce some concepts that will be needed in the assessment of theories of meaning.

Summary

- Some strings of marks or noises are *meaningful sentences*.
- It is an amazing fact that any normal person can instantly grasp the meaning of even a very long and novel sentence.
- Each meaningful sentence has parts that are themselves meaningful.
- Though initially attractive, the Referential Theory of Meaning faces several compelling objections.

Questions

- 1 Can you think of any further objections to the Referential Theory as stated here?
- 2 Are objections 1 and 2 entirely fair, or are there plausible replies that the referential theorist might make?

Further reading

- Probably the most persistent critic of the Referential Theory is Wittgenstein (1953: Part I). A more systematic Wittgensteinian attack is found in Waismann (1965a: ch. 8).
- Arguments of the sort lying behind objection 3 are found in Frege (1892/1952a) and (1892/1952b).
- Bradley's regress is further discussed by Wolterstorff (1970: ch. 4) and by Loux (1998: ch. 1).