

## 6 “Use” theories

### Overview

The Proposition Theory treats sentences and other linguistic items as inert abstract entities whose structure can be studied as if under a microscope. But Ludwig Wittgenstein argued that words and sentences are more like game pieces or tokens, used to make moves in rule-governed conventional social practices. A “meaning” is not an abstract object; meaning is a matter of the role an expression plays in human social behavior. To know the expression’s meaning is just to know how to deploy the expression appropriately in conversational settings.

Wilfrid Sellars’ version of this idea makes the act of inferring central; it is the complexity of patterns of inference that allows the “use” theorist to accommodate long, novel sentences. On this view, one sentence entails another, not because the two “express” “propositions” one of which is somehow “contained in” the other, but because it is socially expected that one’s neighbor would perform the act of inferring the second sentence from the first.

“Use” theories of this kind face two main obstacles: explaining how language use differs from ordinary conventional rule-governed activities, such as chess games, that generate no meaning; and explaining how, in particular, a sentence can mean *that* so-and-so (as the French “*La neige est blanche*” means that snow is white). Robert Brandom has recently offered a “Use Theory” that claims to perform these feats.

As we saw in chapter 2, Russell’s habit was to write a sentence on the blackboard and examine (as he contended) the proposition expressed by the sentence, treating it as an object of interest in itself and trying to discern its structure. Ludwig Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin argued that this picture of how language works and how it should be studied is completely wrong. Languages and linguistic entities are not bloodless abstract objects that can be studied like specimens under a microscope. Rather, language takes the form of behavior, activity—specifically social practice. Sentences do not have lives of their own. The things we write on blackboards, and the alleged “propositions” they express, are fairly violent abstractions from the utterings performed by human beings in real-world contexts on particular occasions.<sup>1</sup>

And for a person to utter something is first and foremost for that person to do something. It is a bit of behavior that by convention has gotten swept up into a rule-governed social practice. We have already encountered a version of this idea in chapter 2, for it is from the same perspective that Strawson wielded his several objections against Russell’s initially attractive Theory of Descriptions. And whether or not we are ultimately convinced by the objections, they were fresh and striking and, to many people, still intuitively compelling. That is a good letter of recommendation for the perspective itself.

### **“Use” in a roughly Wittgensteinian sense**

Wittgenstein (1953) and Austin (1961, 1962) developed this social-behavioral idea in different ways. Here I shall concentrate on a Wittgensteinian view, deferring Austin’s until chapter 12. I say only “a Wittgensteinian view” because, for reasons that cannot detain us here, Wittgenstein himself opposed systematic theorizing in philosophy, and his followers objected to any phrase along the lines of “Wittgenstein’s theory of . . .” or “Wittgenstein’s doctrine regarding . . .”<sup>2</sup> I shall merely try to sketch an account based on Wittgenstein’s contributions, without attributing that or any other theory to Wittgenstein himself.

If meaning itself is mysterious, one way to reduce the mystery is to enter its domain through something with which we are more directly familiar. In order to get a handle on meaning, let us think of it from the receiving end, the grasp of meaning or understanding of linguistic expressions. And in order to understand understanding, let us think of it as the product of our having been taught our language, and as what one learns when one learns a language.

But as soon as we try looking at it that way, something becomes immediately obvious: that what is learned and taught is a complicated form of social behavior. What you learn when you learn a language is to make moves, to engage in certain kinds of practice, conversational behavior in particular. And primarily, what is taught is the right way to behave when other people make certain kinds of noises, and what kinds of noises to make when circumstances are appropriate for doing so. Linguistic practice is governed by highly complex sets of rules, even though the rules are rarely articulated; small children just pick them up at a colossal rate, learning to obey them without realizing that that is what they are doing.

These home truths are obscured by entity theories, which treat meanings as static, inert things. Both Wittgenstein and Austin inveighed at length against entity theories, though here we shall be concerned with a positive account of “use.” Wittgenstein also scorned the view that meaning essentially involves referential relations between linguistic expressions and things in the world (though of course he did not deny that there are some such relations).

Wittgenstein offered the key analogy of linguistic activity to the playing of games. (According to the physicist Freeman Dyson, then a Cambridge undergraduate, one day Wittgenstein was walking past a field where a football

match was in progress, and “the thought first struck him that in language we play *games* with *words*.”)<sup>3</sup> Language is not a matter of marks on the blackboard bearing the “expressing” relation to abstract entities called “propositions”; language is something that people do, and do in a highly rule-governed and conventional way. Linguistic activity is governed by rules in much the way that the playing of a game is governed by rules.

Moreover, linguistic expressions themselves are like game pieces. Consider chessmen. A “pawn” or a “rook” is defined by the chess rules that govern its initial position and subsequent legal moves; what makes a knight a knight is the way in which it characteristically moves according to the game’s conventionally instituted rules. So too, a linguistic expression’s meaning is constituted by the tacit rules governing its correct conversational use.

Start with expressions like “Hello,” “Damn” (or “Good gracious”), “Oh, dear,” “Excuse me,” “Amen,” “Thanks,” “Stop it!,” “You’re on” (when a bet has been offered), and “Bless you.” These do not seem to mean what they do in virtue of standing for anything *or* in virtue of expressing propositions. They are just conventional devices, respectively, of greeting, evincing consternation, deploring, apologizing, endorsing, thanking, protesting, committing oneself to a bet, and blessing. They are noises we make that have socially defined functional roles; there are appropriate occasions for using them, inappropriate occasions for using them, and appropriate responses. When we talk of their meanings, we mean the functions they characteristically perform in the context of our current social practices. On the Wittgensteinian view, this is the locus and natural home of all meaning, though most expressions have vastly more complicated social roles.

To emphasize all this, Wittgenstein coined the term “language-game,” as in the meeting and greeting language-game, the wedding language-game, the arithmetic language-game, and so on.

Wittgenstein offers a further analogy (1953: 2): A builder and his assistant have just four kinds of building stones that they use. They speak a little primitive language that has just four corresponding words in it: “block,” “pillar,” “slab,” and “beam.” They build things, engaging in their nonlinguistic activities aided by a certain primitive sort of linguistic activity: the builder says “slab,” and the assistant brings a stone of the appropriate shape. Now, someone might say, “Of course, that word ‘slab’ bears the referring relation to a block of this shape, and its meaning is the proposition that the assistant is to bring such a block to the builder.” But according to Wittgenstein this would be missing the point. In this little primitive language-game, the word “slab” does have a function that is obviously connected with blocks of that shape, but the point is the function and not the referring relation. The point of the builder’s making the noise “slab” is just to get the assistant to do something, to trigger conventionally (the assistant having learned his trade) a pattern of useful activity. The activity does involve things of this shape, but the primary point is to initiate action, not to refer, or to “express” an eternal proposition.

Of course, it is hard to extrapolate this simple picture of meaning as brutally conventional social function to long and complex sentences like “The present Queen of England is bald” or “In 1931, Adolf Hitler made a visit to the United States, in the course of which he . . .,” neither of which has any easily identifiable conventional social role (other than, unhelpfully, those of *asserting that* the present Queen of England is bald and that in 1931 . . .). Some additional mechanism must be introduced to accomplish that extrapolation. The logical positivists appealed to the notion of verification, but I shall save discussion of that until chapter 8. Wilfrid Sellars (1963, 1974) invoked the idea of *inferring* as a social act. He spoke too of “language-entry rules,” and “language-exit rules,” these being respectively rules governing what one is supposed to say in response to certain sorts of nonlinguistic events (such as observations) and what one is supposed to do in response to certain linguistic utterances, but most importantly of “language–language rules,” which govern what one is supposed to say as the product of inference from something else that has previously been said. Let us call this the Inferential Theory of Meaning.

It is hard to see how a theory that took “Hello” or “Slab” as its paradigms could succeed in explaining the more refined of the meaning facts. Meaningfulness, synonymy, and ambiguity are not a problem; but what of entailment between complex sentences? The Inferential Theory’s appeal to inferring helps, for what might seem to be the static abstract relation of “entailment” between two sentences can be reconstrued as a rule-governed practice of inferring the one from the other. “Harold is fat and Ben is stupid” entails “Ben is stupid” because, if someone asserts the former but denies the latter, we apply severe social sanctions; indeed, we at least raise eyebrows if someone asserts the former and then does not go on to behave as if the latter is true. According to Use theories, it is this practice itself that makes the inference valid, not (as logic books would have it) any independent guarantee that the inference preserves truth.

## Objections and some replies

The beauty of the Inferential Theory is its effortless avoidance of every single objection we have made to each of the three traditional theories (Referential, Ideational, and Proposition). In addition, it is naturalistic, in that it focuses attention on the actual features of language as used in the real world. Still, there are some formidable problems.

### OBJECTION I

All language-games are exactly the same as between Earth and Twin Earth, since those planets are running exactly in parallel; but words on Twin Earth and the rest diverge in meaning from their counterparts on Earth. Of an Earth utterance and its Twin, one may be true and the other false; what more

could be required for difference of meaning? Thus, an expression's meaning is not exhausted by the expression's role in a language-game.

#### REPLY

One can classify "language-games" more finely, and deny that we and our Twin-Earth doppelgangers are playing "the same" game, even though what we are doing would look exactly the same if seen on television. For example, we respond to and act upon *water* (H<sub>2</sub>O), while our Twins do not, but deal with XYZ; different rules altogether, you see. (This actually was Sellars' original intention, though he had not yet heard of Putnam's Twin Earth.)

#### OBJECTION 2

Proper names pose a problem for the "use" theorist. Try stating a rule of use for the name "William G. Lycan," or for the name of your best friend. Remember, it has to be a rule that every competent speaker of your local dialect actually obeys without exception. The only candidate rules that occur to me push the "use" theorist into a description theory of meaning for names. Wittgenstein himself found descriptivism congenial, but he had not read Kripke.

#### OBJECTION 3

The Wittgensteinian theory seems helpless in the face of our original datum: speakers' amazing ability to understand long, utterly novel sentences at first hearing without a moment's thought. Chess pieces and the like are familiar, recurring types of object, and the rules for their use are directed one-to-one upon them. And similarly for "Slab," "Hello," "Ouch," "I do," and other Wittgensteinian examples of expressions whose uses are defined by local rituals or customs. But our ability to understand and act on long novel sentences cannot be the product of our knowing conventions directed upon those utterances, for no conventions have ever been directed upon those utterances.

The Wittgensteinian must grant that we understand novel sentences *compositionally*, in virtue of understanding the individual words that occur in them and working out the sentences' overall meanings from the way in which the individual words are strung together. (We shall have a great deal more to say about this in chapter 9.) It follows that what is understood, that is, a sentence's meaning, is not *simply* a matter of there being conventional norms directed upon that sentence's deployment, for the sentence's meaning is in large part a function of its internal structure as well.

#### OBJECTION 4

Could I not know the use of an expression, and fall in with it, mechanically, without understanding it? I have known undergraduates who are geniuses at picking up academic jargon of one sort or another and slinging it around with great facility, but without understanding. I knew one who took a phenomenology course taught by a visiting Parisian, understood none of it, but learned the knack of stringing the jargon expressions together so well that his term paper earned (or "earned") an A. Use perfect (or at least graded A); meaning nil.

#### OBJECTION 5

Many rule-governed social activities—sports and games themselves in particular—do not centrally involve the kind of meaning that linguistic expressions have. Certainly chess moves and tennis shots do not have meaning of that sort. (Contrast the case where spies are using chess moves as an actual secret code; for example, N–Q3 may have conventionally been stipulated to mean "Take the zircon to Foppa and tell him we move tonight.") What, then is supposed to distinguish language-games from ordinary games?

Suppose some community agrees to use certain words—or at any rate sounds and marks—in a peculiar way; say they decide to put only "words" with the same number of syllables next to each other in threes, or they utter "sentences" only in rhyming pairs, where each string begins with a one-letter word and adds one letter successively to each ensuing item. (This might be a sort of community-wide parlor game.) If a newcomer happened upon this whimsical society and knew nothing of the arrangement, s/he would not understand what was going on. The newcomer might, in time, work out all the rules according to which the various tokens were being used, and yet have no notion what, if anything, was being said. And in this simple case, at least, nothing is being said. Someone might suggest that such a game, like the builders' language, is just too *simple* and/or primitive to qualify. But it is hard to see how the mere addition of further complexity would help.

#### REPLY

Someone might argue that, if its rules are rich enough and advert often enough to ambient conditions, *reference* and predication will be recoverable from the game description. Suppose there is a rule that, whenever the waiter comes in, every third player shouts "Here, waiter," and is given a martini; whenever any player says "Mix please," s/he is passed the bowl of snacks by whoever is nearest it; and the like. One would then be tempted to conclude that "waiter" refers to the waiter and "mix" means snack food. So the game moves would have meaning after all.

## REJOINDER

Perhaps, in that case, the utterances specified by the game rules would have meanings—but only because they do stand for or refer to things and not just because of their conventional deployment behavior.

Let us therefore stipulate that, no matter how complex the game becomes, the players' utterances do not refer to things external to the game; they are only moves in the game. But then it seems even more obvious that the game is not even the beginning of an actual language, and that the moves do not have meaning in the same way that utterances of English sentences do. So the "use" theorist's explicit conditions are not sufficient for something's being a language.

## SECOND REPLY

Waismann (1965a: 158) anticipates an objection of this kind. He hints at a competing reply: that genuine language-games are "integrat[ed] . . . into life." By contrast, the parlor-game words, like chess moves and tennis shots, "bear a far less close relation to life than words used in earnest." A language-game cannot be encapsulated, something that we keep at arm's length and play just when we feel like it.

## REJOINDER

But some language-games, such as the telling of shaggy-dog jokes, are encapsulated and played only occasionally and at will. Also, even if we agree that more serious, multipurpose language-games are thoroughly integrated into life, we usually think of that close, integrative relation as that of *referring*, as our words being about the things in the world that concern us. The Wittgensteinian does not agree that meaning essentially involves referring, and so Waismann needs to say what the "integration" is instead. The idea seems to be that language-games are integrated with *other social practices*. But it is hard to see how the Wittgensteinian can spell that out (a) in such a way as to explain how the linguistic moves take on propositional content, but (b) without secretly introducing referring.

My use just now of the phrase "propositional content" may suggest an unsuccessfully tacit allegiance to the Proposition Theory. But I am using it, and will continue to use it throughout this book, in a weaker sense, as whatever property of a sentence or other item is somehow expressed by a "that" clause, as in "means that broccoli will kill you." We need not take that property to be a matter of bearing the "expression" relation to an abstract entity called "a proposition."

## OBJECTION 6

One clear sense in which a social practice qualifies as an actual language is that, according to it, one can make noises or inscribe marks and thereby *say that P* for some suitable sentence replacing *P*. And one of the things that is surely essential to language is that we can say things in it. But no such indirect discourse is licensed just in virtue of some people’s playing chess or the parlor game; none of the players has said or asked or requested or suggested . . . *that* anything at all. There is something missing. We are playing a game, and using tokens according to a set of conventional rules, and engaging in a social practice that may not only be fun but have some larger point; it might even be in some way vital to our way of life. The things the players in these various games have done may have significance in some sense, but nobody has made any assertions or asked anything or advised anyone to do anything.

## Inferentialism

At this point it is tempting to make some serious concession to the Referential Theory. But that would be to overlook the most recent incarnation of Sellars’ Inferential Theory: Brandom (1994), a 700-page masterpiece, which at least has the potential for evading some of the foregoing objections. Brandom develops a particular conception of “use,” a normative conception according to which a sentence’s use is the set of commitments and entitlements associated with public utterance of that sentence. His paradigm is that of *asserting*, considered as an actual social act: when one utters a sentence and thereby makes an assertion, one is committing oneself to defend that assertion against whatever objection or challenge might be made by a hearer. The defense would take the form of giving *reasons* in support of the assertion, typically by inferring it from some other sentence whose uttering is not so readily open to challenge. And in making the assertion one also confers on oneself the entitlement to make further inferences from it. The social game of giving and asking for reasons is governed by rules, of course, and score is kept. (Notions of scorekeeping play a large role in Brandom’s system.) It is the reasons that would rightly be offered in support of a sentence *S*, and the norms according to which *S* could rightly be given in defense of further sentences, that constitute *S*’s meaning.

As would please Wittgenstein, *reference* plays no important role in this theory. For Brandom, reference is just a construct out of inferential practices defined on whole sentences, and not a fit subject for independent theorizing; the Causal–Historical Theory is entirely beside the point. (However, this exacerbates objection 2.)

Brandom’s system is very complex, and we cannot examine it here. But I note that it overcomes some of the objections raised so far against the



Wittgensteinian view. Against objection 5, it does distinguish linguistic utterances from “Slab,” chess moves, and so on, since those are not the sorts of things in support of which one gives reasons, rebuts challenges, and so on. (One can of course offer practical reasons for having made a particular chess move or tennis shot, but Brandom means *evidential* reasons, utterances that give us reason to believe some statement of fact. Again, his paradigm is that of an inferential reason, and chess moves and the like are certainly not inferences.) Nor is objection 6 a problem, for Sellars himself gave an elegant inferentialist account of *that* clauses. Though Brandom holds that subsentential expressions “have meanings” only derivatively from whole sentence meanings, he also recognizes a weak kind of compositionality, and so he may evade objection 3. And, admirably, he addresses some fairly detailed semantic phenomena: proper names, descriptions, indexicals, quantification, and anaphora, in terms of their characteristic contributions to the commitment/entitlement potentials of sentences in which they occur.<sup>4</sup>

In any case, the centrality of epistemological notions to inferentialist theories—defense, support, justification, acceptance—suggests that the theories are closer in spirit to verification accounts than to Wittgenstein’s original idea. See chapter 8.

A somewhat different sort of “use” theory (Alston 1963, 2000; Barker 2004) is based on J. L. Austin’s notion of “illocutionary force.” But the latter concept will not be introduced until chapter 12.

Now let us move on and look at a considerably different theory of meaning. Paul Grice’s theory begins with the outrageous notion that language is a means of communication.

## Summary

- “Use” theories have it that “meanings” are not abstract objects like propositions; a linguistic expression’s meaning is determined by the expression’s characteristic function in human social behavior.
- According to Wittgenstein, linguistic expressions are like game tokens, used to make moves in rule-governed conventional social practices.
- Sellars’ version of this idea makes the act of *inferring* central, and it is the complexity of patterns of inference that allows the “use” theorist to accommodate long, novel sentences.
- “Use” theories face two main obstacles: explaining how language use differs from ordinary conventional rule-governed activities that generate no meaning; and explaining how a sentence can mean *that* so-and-so.
- Brandom’s “use” theory overcomes some of these obstacles.

## Questions

- 1 Can the Wittgensteinian “Use Theory” as we have sketched it be defended against one or more of objections 1–4?
- 2 Adjudicate objection 5. Can you make a better reply than Waismann’s?
- 3 Come up with a Wittgensteinian reply to objection 6.
- 4 Can a red/green color-blind person understand the word “red”? Think about this in regard to “use” theories.
- 5 If you have read Brandom, discuss his views.

## Further reading

- The literature on Wittgenstein is so vast that I hesitate to mention one or two or three exegetical works to the exclusion of others. But: Rhees (1959–60); Pitcher (1964: ch. 11); Hallett (1967); Kenny (1973: chs 7–9).
- The *locus classicus* of Sellars’ Functional Theory is Sellars (1963); see also Sellars (1974). An excellent exposition and defense of the central themes is given in Rosenberg (1974).
- *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 57 (1997) contains a symposium on Brandom (1994), with a précis, lead papers by John McDowell, Gideon Rosen, Richard Rorty, and J. F. Rosenberg, and a response by Brandom. Brandom (2000) is a more accessible introduction to Brandom 1994).