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MEANING, THEORY OF

Tomado de “Ideas that Matter” de A. C. Grayling

A central concern of analytic philsophy since the early twentieth century has been the question of how meaning attaches to the uttered sounds and written marks that constitute language. Philosophical interest in language is motivated by the conviction that understanding how language works takes us a long way towards understanding both thought and the world. This is because the world shapes and is shaped by our thought about it, while thought, in its turn, is expressed, communicated and accessed through language. So investigating language - and more precisely: the phenomenon of linguistic meaning - turns out to be an important though indirect way of investigating how the mind relates to the world itself.

It is important to be clear about the nature of philosophical interest in language, by discriminating between it and linguistics, which is the empirical study of language structure and functioning.

One simple and at first plausible view of meaning rests on the paradigm of proper names such as ‘Jack’ and ‘Jill’, which function simply as labels. This suggests that the meaning of a word is the object it denotes; thus ‘table’ means (because it denotes) a certain sort of furniture. Of course not all words mean by denoting; such syncategorematic words as ‘if’, ‘but’, ‘and’ and the like get meaning ‘in context’, for obviously there are no ifs and ands in the world for the words ‘if’ and ‘and’ to name. But otherwise, says this view, a word’s meaning is what it labels.

This idea is, however, shown to be false by two considerations. How could even a simple labelling relation between a sound (or mark) and a thing in the world be established without recourse to pre-existing conventions of naming? There is first the ambiguity of ostension (how does the learner of English know that I mean a nearby piece of furniture rather than, say, its uses, colour, or texture when I point in a certain direction and say ‘table’?). Then there is this problem: ‘table’ is used, in conjunction with a demonstrative (‘that table’) or an article (‘the table’, individuated by context), to pick out some particular table on some particular occasion; but the word itself does not denote this or that particular table, but can be applied indifferently to any member of the class of tables, for it is a general term. But what does it mean to say that a general term functions like a proper name? Is there something - a class of things, or a concept, or an ‘abstract idea’ - it denotes?

The second consideration is decisive. Two words or phrases can refer to the same thing but have different senses, as ‘the morning star’ and ‘the evening star’ exemplify; they both denote the planet Venus, yet they differ widely in connotation. Accordingly it is out of the question to make a simple identification of the meaning of a word with its referent.

The denotative theory invites a charge of absurdity too. If the meaning of a term is the object it denotes, it would be possible to pull the meaning of the word ‘handkerchief’ from one’s pocket. But this is nonsense, and so too is the idea that the meaning of ‘handkerchief’ is all the handkerchiefs there are, were, and will be.

Denotation, therefore, cannot constitute meaning. Nevertheless, the original intuition regarding the way proper names function, and the fact that reference is central to our use of language, raise important questions. Manifestly, there are classes of expressions that do, or can be

used to, refer to items in the world. How does reference work? What do we have to know, if anything, to use a referring term successfully? These are the very first steps in the complex and far-ranging enquiry that tries to understand the nature of meaning in language.

It seems obvious from the grammatical and lexical differences between languages that the sounds and marks which carry or contribute to meaning are conventional items, that is, are the product of an implicit agreement between members of the linguistic community in question to attach a given significance to them. But this is something that applies only at the surface level of language, according to Noam Chomsky and those he has influenced; for them language has a deep structure, innate to the brains of human beings, which permits any infant to learn any language if exposed to it. Chomsky points out that small children acquire a knowledge of the grammar of their community's language despite only ever being offered a fragmentary and degenerate example of it, in the form of the scanty half-finished sentences they hear in the linguistic environment of their early years. This suggests that there is a 'deep grammar' hard-wired into human brains that supports the particular surface grammar of the language spoken by the community into which an individual is born.

By itself this does not achieve the philosophical goal of explaining linguistic meaning. For this a wide range of phenomena have to be understood, some of which have been claimed to be the key factor in meaning. One is the way that the use of words and sentences enters into giving them meaning. Another is the work done by the intentions of speakers in seeking to communicate with others. A third is the way that expressions can be used to pick out things or events, describe them, convey facts about the manner in which they exist or happen, and much more. A fourth is the nature of the relationship between mental states and language, and between both of these and the world (or more generally the domains) over which thought and talk range.

One suggested entry into the complex of questions raised by the concept of meaning is to say that the key lies in employing the notion of a 'truth-condition', thus: the meaning of a sentence is given by stating the conditions under which it is true, and the meaning of the sentence's constituent words is the contribution they make to the sentence's meaning. On the face of it this looks trivial, for in effect it asks us to take the statement ' "snow is white" is true in English if and only if snow is white' as giving the meaning of 'snow is white'. But note that the first occurrence of the words 'snow is white' is enclosed in quotation marks to show that the words are being quoted rather than used, and that the rest of the sentence is about it - as in this case: ' "la neige est blanche" is true in French if and only if snow is white'. Here English is the metalanguage and French the object language, and the meaning of the object-language sentence is being given by stating, in the metalanguage, the condition under which it is true.

This truth-conditional theory of meaning has been highly influential in recent philosophy, but it has been opposed by those who think that the concept of use is a more satisfactory key to an account of meaning. One reason is that the truth-conditional approach requires that declarative sentences all be determinately true or false whether or not we know which, thus appearing to put what is required for grasp of meaning beyond our epistemic powers. This entails what critics see as an over- strong 'realist' thesis to the effect that there are facts of the matter about everything, even if we do not know or can never know what they are; and that it is in virtue of them that all sentences are determinately true or false, again whether or not we know which. But if we cannot know these things, how can we grasp the meanings of what we say in terms of them?

Another reason is that in any case it is a fact about language that expressions change their meanings with change in the way they are used, so the conventional nature of meaning is respected by the use theory, which at the same time places meaning and grasp of meaning squarely within the competence of ordinary speakers. The use theory is most associated with the later work of Ludwig

Wittgenstein (see his Philosophical Investigations), but a version of it is implied by the influential work of Michael Dummett, a leading critic of the ‘realist’ truth-conditional approach.

One must distinguish between philosophy of language, as just sketched, and both ‘linguistic philosophy’ and ‘ordinary language philosophy’, in which latter version this approach to philosophy flourished mainly at Oxford University in the 1950s. In essence both labels denote the view that philosophical problems are the spurious result of misunderstandings about the way language works, and if only we would pay very careful attention to how we speak, and if we resist the temptation to assimilate one way of speaking to other ways, we will avoid generating the pseudo- problems in which - so proponents claim - philosophy mainly consists.

Wittgenstein was a leading influence in this respect. In his Philosophical Investigations he advanced the view that expressions in language acquire their meanings from the way they are used in given areas of discourse that he called ‘language games’, rather as the nature and significance of the chess piece called a ‘bishop’ are determined by its role in the game of chess. If one took the bishop and tried to use it in draughts as it is used in chess, the result would be muddle and nonsense. In just this way, said Wittgenstein, if an expression is used out of its proper linguistic habitat it will give rise to muddle, and such muddles are what philosophy consists in. Proper attention to language will thus ‘dissolve’ philosophy.

In Oxford in the 1950s the leading figures of Gilbert Ryle and especially J.L. Austin applied the technique of careful and precise examination of the way words are ordinarily used to make a similar case. Neither their approach nor that of Wittgenstein survived the compelling individual charisma of their proponents. It is easy to see why: one might know all the different ways in which the words ‘true’ and ‘truth’ are used, and yet be all the more rather than less puzzled, as a result, about what truth is; so far from solving the problem or quietening the desire to understand what truth is, the variety of uses and senses will stimulate the desire for a deeper understanding.

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