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PHIL 223: Final Paper

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On Meaning

Meaning is a tricky subject to talk about, especially in the context of language. If we try to talk about what language means, we inevitably use the language we are trying to define in the process. Yet it is clear that we as people use words, and that these words turn into actions or more language when people hear it. So what we say must mean *something*, right? Well that all depends on how we define meaning. I think most would agree that meaning, in the context of language, is the idea that is conveyed by a word or phrase. Of course now we must define idea. I will return to this later after examining a few concepts of meaning that might lead to different “idea” definitions.

Let us examine a kind of sentence that clearly results in action, and therefore must convey some sort of meaning. If one of my housemates says to me, “we have no clean dishes!” there are several of actions I may take in response. In the first case, this is said with directness and perhaps anger, and I know that most of the dirty dishes are mine and I reply by cleaning them. In the second case, this statement implies that I should supply some paper plates since the actual dishes are clearly useless. In another case, this statement only implies that we have dishes and that they lack the quality of being clean, and nothing else. I pull out these different meanings based on how the statement is phrased, and based on the facial expression of the person saying it. Even though the perceived meanings of this sentence look different, all of them include the idea that dishes exist and they are dirty. So one could say that this is the meaning of this sentence, and that all the other meanings I pull out of it are in fact not meanings of the sentence, but rather of other qualities of the scenario in which it is spoken.

However, there is a refutation to this. Say, for instance, that the person speaking is looking at a solitary dirty dish in a sea of clean dishes, and sarcastically saying “we have no clean dishes!” to exemplify the bounty of cleanness in front of him or her. In this case, the sentence means the opposite of what we agreed it should mean. One could imagine as well a more rare case where “clean dishes” is in fact a code name for some other unrelated object. So in all of these cases, the meaning of the sentence relies largely on the particular instance and relationship of the people to whom it is said. The only reason we can all agree to similar meanings for similar statements, I think, is because the manner in which different people speak to each other is largely the same. This is true for all people, especially true for people who speak the same language, and even more true for people who speak to each other frequently. So, in the case of this kind of sentence, I agree with Quine’s ideas about language and behaviorism when it comes to meaning.[[1]](#footnote--1)[[2]](#footnote-0)

Does this change with sentences that might not result in action? Let us look at the sentence “The letter ‘B’ comes after the letter ‘A’”. This sentence’s meaning, for most, implies that these letters of our alphabet have an ordering, and that when one orders them, he or she should put B after A. However, perhaps this statement was said to someone who had bet money that, in fact, B comes before A. Then, this statement implies that money should be paid. One could come up with almost any example like this for any sentence. For this reason, I think the meaning of statements lies entirely within the exact interaction, written or verbal, made with the person who is reading or hearing it. The fact that we can have certain definitions of words that hold among large numbers of people is merely a reflection of the common interactions of different people. In fact, this idea is not only limited to people. It is easy to train a dog to react in a certain way to certain statements or noises. To the dog, the statements probably boil down to something like “please person, get food” (in human speak).

What this train of thought leads me to is the idea that statements “mean” something insofar as they have some result or consequence. Even statements that result in no action do result in some thought or at least some vibration of air outside the speaker’s mouth. I would say that even if statements are merely thought by some solitary man in the woods that they have meaning in that they are un-uttered words that occur at a certain time in someone’s head, and that this, at the very least, causes some change in the man’s brain. My gauge then for meaningfulness is in the total amount of particle movement that occurs as a result of the word or phrase. If a president says, “fire the nuke” or if Jesus says, “I am the son of God,” these are more meaningful statements than any statement you or I could make. By this standard, one might say that of all the statements made in our solar system, that the Sun’s ever present silent burning is the most meaningful. But can we even consider that to be a statement or a language? Well, following my own earlier logic, if someone thinks that the definition of language includes heat emitted by non-sentient matter, then that is what language means to him or her. Here we reach the difficulty I mentioned at the beginning of the paper in talking about these things. If I am to say anything definitive about what language means, I force myself to reduce it to the particle movements that result from whatever people choose to call language.

I mentioned earlier that meaning relies on the definition of idea. Remember that meaning ought to be the idea represented by a word or phrase. Well, if the meaning of a word is measured by the amount and quality of physical movement that results from it, then the idea itself must be this movement. In this way, I have reduced the term “idea” to particle movement, and I have reduced the term “meaning” to the measure of this movement. One might say I have gone too far in this. I think this is indeed a logical consequence of my premise, but I will agree that this idea is much less useful in interpreting language than if we limit it somewhat.

Let us say that language is limited to interactions between human beings involving words and phrases. Then, my point can be reigned in a bit to say that meaning relies on the resulting action of any person after a word or phrase is uttered, and that idea is whatever neuron movement that happens in someone’s brain when a word is produced. This thought leads me to agree again with Quine on this matter. I agree that any logical definition of meaning in language must rely on stimuli and responses related to words and phrases, and that linguistics inevitably boils down to a study of human behavior.[[3]](#footnote-1)

For me, the definition of meaning is the same with regards to any subject, be it language, religion, mathematics, or anything else. I feel that meaning can only be truly described by the particle movements that result from whatever thing you are trying to give meaning to. However, I also do not think that we should try to define meaning logically, because I do not think it is a logical idea. It is a word like “belief” or “faith” that transcends truth-value and should only be interpreted by the person who feels whatever “idea” is behind it.

Works Cited

Jason Decker. *Handout 9: Quine on Meaning*. From PHIL 223, Carleton College, 2014

Willard Van Orman Quine. *Translation and Meaning.* From *Readings in the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997. Pp. 49-58.

1. Decker, Jason. *Handout 9: Quine on Meaning*. From PHIL 223, Carleton College, 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. Quine, Willard Van Orman. *Translation and Meaning.* From *Readings in the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997. Pp. 49-58. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
3. Decker [↑](#footnote-ref-1)