LING 001: Philosophical Perspective

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Today

- Viewing language meaning from a philosophical perspective
- Deciding whether to study the communicative use of language as a separate matter or not
- Introducing different theories of communication:
  1. Theories of formal semantics
  2. Theories of communication-intention

Different views

View 1:

- We study linguistic structure on its own terms.
- We study the communicative use of language as a separate matter.
- We look at bits of language -- words or phrases -- as objects on their own terms.

View 2:

- Languages arise as a part of the process of communication, and can't usefully be studied outside that context.
- The connection to physical acts of speaking (phonetics), or the connection to "meanings" (semantics and pragmatics), or the connection to social situations (sociolinguistics).
- The connections to the communicative process may now be essential, and these connections are at least as intricate and curious as language itself is.

Language and Meaning

- Much of 20th-century philosophy has centered around this question of the connections between language and the world.

i) What is it for anything to have a meaning at all, in the way, or in the sense, in which words or sentences or signals have meaning?

ii) What is it for a particular sentence to have the meaning or meanings it does have?

iii) What is it for a particular phrase, or a particular word, to have the meaning or meanings it does have?

Strawson's dichotomy

	Theorists of formal semantics	Theorists of communication-intention
Belief	• People can understand language without having thought of the function of communication at all. They just know rules that determine the meanings of sentences. • Meaning is something that sentences have.	• It is impossible to give an adequate account of the concept of meaning without reference to speakers' audience-directed intentions. • Meaning is something that people do.
Important people	Frege, Chomsky, early Wittgenstein	Grice, Austin, late Wittgenstein

Theory of formal semantics

- **Formal Semantics** - seeks to understand linguistic meaning by constructing precise mathematical models of the principles that speakers use.

  i) **Mathematical models** - formal logic, and formal language theory, especially lambda calculus.

- Another important aspect of meaning that we would like our semantic theory to explain is its productivity.

  i) Ability to interpret a potentially infinite number of sentences

  ii) We need a finite set of rules which are able to (recursively) define/interpret an infinite set of propositions.

Formal meaning of a sentence: evidence

- We can use our semantic intuitions to decide on the correctness of semantic rules.
- The closest parallel to ungrammaticality is nonsensicality or semantic anomaly. The propositions in (1) are all grammatical but nonsensical.

(1). A. Colourless green ideas sleep furiously.

B. Kim frightened sincerity.

C. Thirteen is very crooked.

Formal meaning of a sentence: evidence

- Consider the following sentences:

(2) A. It is raining and it is not raining.

B. A bachelor is a married man.

C. Kim killed Mary but she walked away.

Formal meaning of a sentence: evidence

- The assertion of some propositions implies the truth of other propositions.
- (3-A) implies (3-B), and (4-C) implies (4-D).

(3) A. John walked slowly.

B. John walked.

C. John sold Mary the book.

D. Mary bought the book from John.

- We would like our semantic theory to predict and explain these intuitions e.g., contradiction.

Theorists of Formal Semantics: Frege

- **Frege** - a German mathematician, logician, and a philosopher who reconceived the discipline of logic by constructing a formal system which, in effect, constituted the first 'predicate calculus'.
- Developed an analysis of quantified statements.
- Demonstrated that one could use his system to resolve theoretical mathematical statements in terms of simpler logical and mathematical notions.
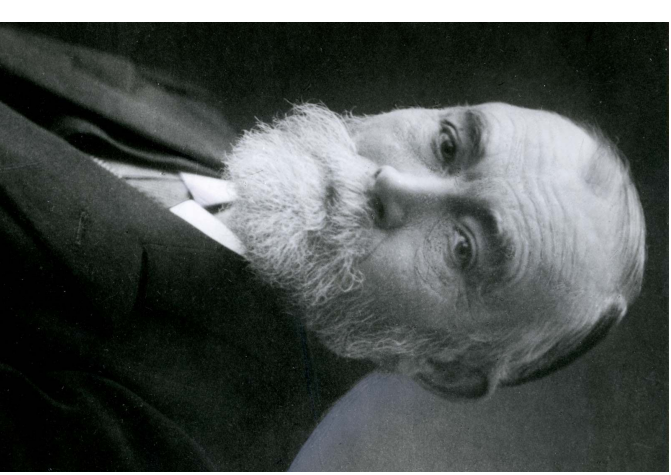
Frege's Identity Statement

Identity statements: one object is identical to another object. An object is identical to itself.

1. 5=5
2. Mark Twain is Mark Twain.

Frege's Identity Statement

However, these are also identity statements. They are saying the same thing, but they are conveying more information than the previous statements.

1. $5 = \sqrt{25}$
2. Mark Twain is Samuel Clemens

Frege's Identity Statement

- According to the Law of Identity, statements of the form a=a should be no different than statements of the from a=b.
- While statements of the form a=a can be seen to be true, statements of the form a=b require some other information.

  (i) If I don't know math, I would not be able to tell you that 5= √25

  (ii) If I don't know certain historical facts, I can't tell you that Mark Twain is Samuel Clemens.

- There is a difference in meaning between a=a and a=b even though if they are true, the law of identity claims they should have the same meaning.
- How can we account for the difference between a=b and a=a when they are true?

Theorists of communication-intention

	Theorists of formal semantics	Theorists of communication-intention
Belief	• People can understand language without having thought of the function of communication at all. They just know rules that determine the meanings of sentences. • Meaning is something that sentences have.	• It is impossible to give an adequate account of the concept of meaning without reference to speakers' audience-directed intentions. • Meaning is something that people do.
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Ludwig Wittgenstein: word-game

He sees language use as "interactions with other individuals in which we move around sets of linguistic counters; and like a set of games, each of these little encounters has its own set of rules." (*Philosophical Investigation*, 1953)

Meaning arises only in the context of such interactions, and it is not possible to reconstruct a successful account of meaning that ignores these contexts.

A word or even a sentence has meaning only as a result of the "rule" of the "game" being played.

Wittgenstein: word meaning

E.g. What does the utterance "Water!" mean?

Depends on the "rules" of your "game"!

Wittgenstein: word meaning

E.g. What does the utterance "Water!" mean?

- an order
- a request
- to answer a question "What does ice become when melted?"
- to warn someone that the water has been poisoned
- a code by members of a secret society

Wittgenstein: sentence meaning

Same idea, the utterance "Moses did not exist" can mean various things.

- no person or historical figure fits the set of descriptions attributed to the person that goes by the name of "Moses".
- the leader of the Israelites was not called Moses.
- there cannot have been anyone who accomplished all that the Bible relates of Moses, etc.

"Meanings cannot be extricated from individual/cultural association from which they arise."

J.L. Austin: Theory of Speech Acts

Article "How to do things with words"

Utterances are often actions, their meaning cannot be understood without reference to the actions that they (attempt to) perform and the communicative contexts where the acts occur.

- Give lecture
- Make promise
- Threaten...

H. P. Grice

Sentence meaning: the literal meaning of an utterance.

Speaker's meaning: what someone uses an utterance to mean.

Grice's aim was to understand how "speaker's meaning" arises from "sentence meaning."

Grice: Saying ≠ Implicating, Theory of Implicatures

Sometimes, speakers meaning doesn't align with sentence meaning.

"What is said" is limited to what is meant conventionally by the sentence, and does not include whatever else the speaker may have been trying to convey.

"What the speaker may be implying", suggesting, hinting at, conveying, indicating, etc. go beyond what is said.

Grice formulated a theory to account for how important aspects of non-literal meaning can be calculated based on the assumption that discourse participants act as rational agents.

Grice: Cooperative Principles

The reason why we get speakers' meaning is that some assumptions about norms of cooperative behavior play important roles in the reasoning process that speakers and hearers use in the joint construction of meaning.

Grice proposed a set of maxims that people generally adhere to

Grice: Principle of Quantity

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).

2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

e.g.

Parent: "How are your final grades?"

Child: "Algebra is alright."

Grice: Principle of Quality

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.

2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

E.g.

A: How did Harry fare in court the other day?

B: Oh, he got a fine.

• If A later found out that Harry in fact got a prison sentence of 10 years as well, he'd be surprised!

• B implicates that the fine was the only punishment Harry got in court

Grice: Principle of Relation

"Be relevant"

e.g.

A: So how did the meeting go?

B: The weather is really nice today

By saying something entirely irrelevant, B is indicating that he doesn't want to talk about this

Grice: Principle of Manner

"Be concise and orderly and etc."

E.g. Because we expect things to be said orderly, when Milena said we are going to review what theorists of formal semanticists think and what theorists of communication-intention think, you kind of expect this lecture unfolds in that order.

E.g. "My friends sang Happy Birthday to me!"

"They uttered a series of pitches that more or less corresponds to the melody of the song that people conventionally sing to each other on their birthdays."

Flouting the principles

In certain circumstances, we can use blatant violations of maxims strategically to get our point across indirectly. (It still crucially relies on the other maxims being in place.)

Irony is straight-up flouting of Principle of Quality!

"Great. Another rainy day. How wonderful."

So is **Metaphor**:

"You are the cream in my coffee."

Flouting the Principle

Flouting Quantity

A: I wonder whether John will come to the party

B: Either John will come or he won't come.

Flouting Manner

"They uttered a series of pitches that more or less corresponds to the melody of the song that people conventionally sing to each other on their birthdays."

Exercise: What principles are at play?

A is planning with B an itinerary for a holiday in France. Both know that A wants to see his friend C, if this detour would not involve too much trouble:

A: Where does C live?

B: Somewhere in the South of France.

A got the implicature that B isn't really sure where exactly C lives.

Example 1:

A: Where does C live?

B: Somewhere in the South of France.

A got the implicature that B isn't really sure where exactly C lives.

B violates **Quantity** because the amount of information he gave would not meet A's request for the current purpose of planning a trip. It looks like that B is still engaging this conversation, so probably the reason why he didn't provide further information is that he doesn't know more and doesn't want to violate **Quality** by providing fake or unreliable information.

Example 2:

On a Recommendation letter for Grad School:

Professor(speaker): "The student has extremely good handwriting and is always punctual."

Admission officer(receiver): Assuming we all know to be relevant during communication, the reason why he is not commenting on the more relevant quality: originality, curiosity, diligence and etc. must be that he doesn't think highly of the student in these aspects.
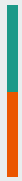
Who's right? Formal semanticists or Communication intention-ists

Theorists of formal semanticists: studying meaning of linguistic units in their own terms is efficient. There are certain universal underlying logic that we employ to construct meaning of sentences.

Communication intention-ists: we use implication rather than literal meaning of sentences, which require establishing assumptions of intentions that vary across contexts. (Usually now we say they are in the realm of pragmatics)

We can imagine a **middle ground** where sentences have their own "literal meanings," but speakers can use sentences creatively to communicate other messages as well, just like someone might use a screwdriver as a weapon, a pry bar or a writing instrument.

Thank you for your attention!