

Theories of Meaning

Lecture 4: Pragmatics

1. Meaning as truth-conditions To know the truth conditions of a sentence just is to know that sentence's meaning. A sentence's truth-conditions can be specified using some general formula (Davidson: 'theory of meaning').

2. Literalism vs Contextualism Literalism: all truth-conditional content attaches to sentence *types*. Contextualism: not all truth-conditional content attaches to sentence *types* (i.e. some truth-conditional content attaches to sentence *tokens*).

3. Indexicality Indexical sentences possess a determinate (truth-evaluable) meaning only when uttered. A sentence is indexical iff some of its terms are indexical. A term is indexical if its reference shifts from context to context. A feature of natural language sentences. Does language need indexicality?

4. Radical contextualism (RC) No truth-conditional content attaches to sentence *types* (i.e. all truth-conditional content attaches to sentence *tokens*). Travis cases: 'These leaves are green.'

Pia's Japanese maple is full of russet leaves. Believing that green is colour of leaves, she paints them. Returning, she reports, 'That's better. The leaves are green now.' She speaks truth. A botanist friend then phones, seeking green leaves for the study of green-leaf chemistry. 'The leaves (on my tree) are green,' Pia says. 'You can have those.' But now Pia speaks falsehood. (Travis 1997: 89)

Is a (Davidsonian) theory of meaning still possible?

5. Two ways of resisting radical contextualism A. The context-sensitivity identified by RC still does not generalise. B. We are dealing only with an apparent context-sensitivity of meaning (semantics/pragmatics distinction).

6. Compositionality of natural language According to RC, is the meaning of a complex expression determined by its structure and the meanings of its constituents? Is English compositional? Can we offer a 'constructive' account of the meaning of the sentences of English?