

The Primacy of Meaning

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Abstract

An essay in the thread of the philosophy of language.

1 Primacy of Meaning

- 1.1 Meaning e.g. as something which can be ‘captured’ or expressed, is objective and exists in an absolute sense. This surpasses the issue of objective existence of referent entities.
- 1.2 In principle, however, the existentiality of ‘meaning’ only comes into being with the appearance or emergence of the first cognizer. Ontologically, meaning only exists together with the existence of cognition.
- 1.3 Meaning exists only in relation to a linguistic expression. Meaning content is attribute to an instance of a linguistic expression in use i.e. one particular instance or incident.
- 1.4 Meaning is the outcome, what is produced in the mind by information. Meaning is information cognized.
- 1.5 Whether non-human species have a language is an ill-formed question. We can talk in terms such as having a knowledge paradigm, and communication involving updates between such knowledge paradigms.
- 1.6 Sentential utterances fire off, or innervate their associated *configuration*, as the meaning produced in cognition, in the mind of the interpreter.

Philosophers very often talk about investigating, analysing, the meaning of words. But let’s not forget that a word hasn’t got a meaning given to it, as it were, by a power independent of us, so that there could be a kind of scientific investigation into what the word really means. A word has the meaning someone has given to it.

– Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (1965)

2 Symbol - Sign and its Context - Meaning, or Signified

“But if we had to name anything which is the life of the sign,
we should have to say that it was its *use*. ”

– Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (1965)

“Since the natural disposition to language is universal in man, and everyone must possess the key to the understanding of all languages, it follows automatically that the form of all languages must be essentially the same, and always achieve the universal purpose. The difference can lie only in the means, and only within the limits permitted by attainment of the goal. ”

– Wilhelm von Humboldt, *On Language* (1836)

- 2.1 Symbols exist in the physical reality. Whereas signs exist in the mental reality.
- 2.2 A symbol has the capacity to carry a sign. The relation of a symbol to the plane of signs is one of binary indicatorship. It may or may not carry a sign.
- 2.3 A sign is always occurring in some context with other signs. Only when a sign is contextualised with the other signs present within its frame of occurrence, does its meaning become visible. Therefore, a symbol / sign should always be considered together with the context of its occurrence, for the discovery of its true meaning.
- 2.4 The relation of a sign-symbol (a sign-bearing symbol, or a symbol containing a sign) to the plane of meaning, or signifieds, is one-to-many. A sign-symbol can be used for the denotation of different meanings, in different usages or instances of use.
- 2.5 It is only when a sign-symbol is contextualised within its frame of occurrence, together with the signs occurring in juxtaposition with it and in relation to it, does its singular, true or intended meaning come into clear view. This contextualisation can be compared to finding the proper fit for a piece in a jigsaw puzzle.
- 2.6 Despite the arbitrariness intrinsic to semiotic systems between the sign-symbols and the signifieds, two things can be noted with certainty to have an objective reality.
 - 2.6.1 The “naturalness”. of fit, between a sign-symbol, its context, and its meaning. This can be perceived innately, and is used for the discovery of its true meaning.
 - 2.6.2 The meanings of two (sign, context) pairs, may be more similar or less similar. This also is innately perceptible.

3 Language in the Mind

“Ideas are enclosed and almost bound in words . . .
. . . like precious stones in a ring. ”

– Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone* (1822)

“Signs are small measurable things, but interpretations are
illimitable, and in girls of sweet, ardent nature, every sign is
apt to conjure up wonder, hope, belief, vast as a sky,
and coloured by a diffused thimbleful of
matter in the shape of knowledge. ”

– George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (1871)

- 3.1 Noam Chomsky is known for forwarding the postulate that a mentalist representation of a native speaker’s language competence is best described in terms of constituent structure. That is, as a set of constituent structure rules: e.g. $NP \rightarrow D NP$

Where smaller and larger constituents are related to one-another by these rules. Smaller constituents are organized into larger constituents hierarchically.

- 3.2 Whereas construction grammar hypothesizes that this mental representation is an ontology map of concepts. Almost the same as an ontology map of words in the lexicon. Except it allows for longer constructions of multiple words to be atomic at the same level as words in the lexicon.

- 3.3 Therefore, a native speaker’s grammaticality intuition, or sense about grammaticality of constituent parts in adjacency, exists alongside a mental inventory of constructions or usages learned from experience. Constructions may be called from memory directly, instead of being joined together as a string of words in real-time speech production.

- 3.4 Sentences hang as activation paths in a connected graph.

- 3.4.1 The lexicon is a hierarchically organized ontology of concepts.
- 3.4.2 A sentence is an activation path in this ontology. Similar to a path in a graph.
- 3.4.3 A word in a sentence may have two or more senses attached to it as possible meanings. Then, the sentence may have two (or more) activation paths corresponding to it.

4 Representation of Knowledge

“The propositions of philosophy are not factual, but linguistic in character - that is, they do not describe the behaviour of physical, or even mental, objects; they express definitions, or the formal consequences of definitions.”

– A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936)

“Language is a system of signs that express ideas. ”

– Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (1916)

- 4.1 Representations of reality are built around a set of focal concepts as starting assumptions.
- 4.2 Different choices for these primitives yield different implications, or perspectives on a set of objective facts.
- 4.3 It seems important to choose the right set of words. To represent in words, i.e. when putting into words, the model of the system, or one of its specifiable configurations.
- 4.4 Otherwise upon revisiting, and after having forgotten some details. As invariably happens, when conducting the study of a complex set of phenomena. We would be reasoning within an erroneous set of facts, which does not accurately represent the thing or phenomena being tried to describe or understand.
- 4.5 It is as if being misled by the wrong metaphor being used. In other words, it is commenting on the importance of better ontological clarity in scientific investigation.
- 4.6 Formal mathematics is a constructed understanding of some deeper truths, surely. But it is also a construction, or more rightly, a set of constructions.