

Introduction

THIS BOOK FOCUSES on two main facets of the philosophy of language: its contribution to the development of a theoretical framework for studying language, and the investigation of foundational concepts—truth, reference, meaning, possibility, propositions, assertion, and implicature—that are needed for this investigation, and important for philosophy as a whole. Part 1 traces major milestones in the development of the theoretical framework for studying the semantic structure of language. Part 2 explores new ways of thinking about what meaning is, and how it is distinguished from aspects of language use.

Philosophy of language is, above all else, the midwife of the scientific study of language, and language use. By *language*, I mean both natural languages like English, and invented languages like those of logic and mathematics. By *language use* I mean its private use in thought, as well as its public use to communicate thoughts. The central fact about language is its representational character. Exceptional cases aside, a meaningful declarative sentence S represents the world as being a certain way. To sincerely accept, or assertively utter, S is to believe, or assert, that the world is the way S represents it to be. Since the representational contents of sentences depend on their grammatical structure and the representational contents of their parts, linguistic meaning is an interconnected system.

In studying it, we exploit the relationship between meaning and truth. For S to be meaningful is for it to represent the world as being a certain way, which is to impose conditions the world must satisfy, if it is to be the way S represents it. Since these are the truth conditions of S, being meaningful involves having truth conditions. Thus, the systematic study of meaning requires a framework for specifying the truth conditions of sentences on the basis of their syntactic structure, and the representational contents of their parts. This framework arose largely from the work of four philosopher-logicians. The first, Gottlob Frege, invented modern

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symbolic logic, used it to analyze arithmetical concepts, and laid the basis for compositional theories of meaning, reference, and truth conditions. The second was Bertrand Russell, whose analyses of natural language extended Frege's contribution. The third was Alfred Tarski, who both developed theories that derive the truth conditions of all sentences of certain logical languages from specifications of the referents of their parts, and combined these with illuminating definitions of logical truth and consequence. The last, Rudolf Carnap, saw the implications of Tarski's work for the study of meaning, and helped lay the basis for extending it to modal systems. The result was a theoretical framework for the semantic investigation of grammatically simple, but expressively powerful, formal languages into which substantial fragments of natural languages could be translated.

Since Tarski's formal languages lacked key features of natural languages, including context-sensitivity and various forms of *intensionality*, further work was needed. Some constructions—e.g., those involving epistemic, counterfactual, or modal operators—are intensional in that their extensions, or truth values, aren't determined by the reference of their parts. These constructions point to dimensions of meaning beyond reference for subsentential constituents, and truth conditions for sentences, in the sense provided by Tarski. Sensitivity to this led to a recognition that the truth conditions assigned to sentences by his theories are too weak to determine their meanings. While some struggled to find ways around the problem, proponents of (*context-sensitive*) *intensional logic* showed how to alleviate (though not fully solve) it, by relativizing Tarski-style theories of truth to contexts of utterance and possible states of the world. This approach, widely known as *possible worlds semantics*, was pioneered by a second group of philosopher-logicians led by Saul Kripke, Richard Montague, David Lewis, Robert Stalnaker, and David Kaplan. In addition to providing truth conditions of a more robust sort, the approach expanded the languages amenable to Tarski's techniques to include those incorporating modal concepts expressed by 'necessary', 'possible', 'could', and 'would', temporal concepts expressed by natural-language tenses, and indexical notions expressed by worlds like 'I', 'he', and 'now'. With this enrichment of the framework for studying meaning, it became possible to imagine the day

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in which natural languages would be treatable in something close to their entirety by descendants of the formal techniques initiated by Tarski. This story is told in part 1.

Part 2 takes up the most important conceptual challenges we face in advancing this agenda. First, two crucial aspects of the metaphysics of meaning—propositions and possible world-states—are investigated. After reviewing why propositions—needed as meanings of sentences and objects of the attitudes—can neither be extracted from theories of truth conditions, nor defined in terms of possible world-states, I explain why they also can't be the mysterious, inherently representational, abstract objects they have traditionally been taken to be. Instead of explaining the representationality of sentences and cognitive states in terms of their relations to the supposedly prior and independent representationality of propositions, we must explain the representationality of propositions in terms of the representationality of the cognitive states with which they are connected. Chapter 5 presents a new approach, constructed along these lines.

This approach is coupled with a conception of possible world-states as properties that specify what the world would be like if the sets of basic propositions with which they are defined were true. Other features of this conception include (i) the accommodation of metaphysically impossible, but epistemically possible, world-states, (ii) the inquiry-relativity of the spaces of states needed by our theories, (iii) an account of our *a priori* knowledge of world-states, and (iv) an explanation of why the actual world-state can be known either in the same manner as other world-states, or as it is empirically, and indexically, given to us. This, in turn, leads to the resolution of an apparent paradox involving *a priori* knowledge of the truth of *a posteriori* propositions at the actual world-state, and to the recognition that certain truths are, in principle, knowable *a priori*, even though some of their simple *a priori* consequences aren't.

Finally, I explore the relationship between theories of linguistic meaning and theories of language use. This problem—widely known as that of the “semantics-pragmatics interface”—is the focus of intense contemporary investigation. At issue is whether the traditional conception of the relationship between meaning and use can survive. According to that conception, the semantic

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content of a sentence in context is always a proposition, which, special circumstances aside, is both asserted by utterances of the sentence in the context, and itself the source of whatever subsidiary assertions may result. Problems are posed for this conception, based on a wide variety of expressions, constructions, and uses of sentences. Solutions are sought by comparing semantic analyses defending the traditional account with those challenging it. In the end, I defend an emerging conception of the relationship between meaning and use, according to which the meaning of a sentence is a set of constraints on what normal uses of it assert, or express. When the sentence is syntactically complete, but semantically incomplete, its semantic content doesn't determine a complete, truth-evaluative thought or assertion, and so must be pragmatically supplemented. When its meaning does determine a complete proposition p , normal uses of it express thoughts, or result in assertions, the contents of which are proper pragmatic enrichments p^* of p . Whether or not p itself counts as asserted varies, depending on the relationship that holds between p , p^* , and the presuppositions of the context.

Despite once influential Quinean skepticism about meaning, today there are, I think, no serious grounds for doubting that words have meaning, that for each there are correct answers to the question “What does it mean?,” and that two expressions are synonymous when the answer is the same for both. Much the same can be said of previously widespread skepticism about propositions, once one abandons outmoded views of what they are. However, there are serious questions about what parts of the information carried by uses of a sentence are included in its meaning, and what parts are not. The search for principles that will answer these questions by distinguishing aspects of meaning from aspects of use is inseparable from the task of formulating a conception of what meaning is that clarifies the content of the claim we make when we say that a piece of information is part of it. These are, in my opinion, the most urgent conceptual challenges confronting the philosophical, and scientific, study of language today. They are also the tasks to which the final chapter is devoted.