5 Traditional theories of meaning

Overview

If the Referential Theory of Meaning is false, what theory is true? Any theory of meaning must account for the relevant facts, which we may call “the meaning facts”: that some physical objects are meaningful (at all); that distinct expressions can have the same meaning; that a single expression can have more than one meaning; that the meaning of one expression can be contained in that of another; and more. We tend to talk of “meanings” as individual things.

Meanings have been thought to be particular ideas in people’s minds. But several objections show that this cannot mean actual thoughts in the minds of particular people at particular times. At best, meanings would have to be more abstract: types of idea that might (or might not) occur in the mind of some being somewhere.

Accordingly, meanings have also been taken to be abstract things in themselves, alternately called “propositions.” The sentence “Snow is white” means that snow is white; equally, we may say it “expresses the proposition that” snow is white. Other sentences, even in other languages such as “La neige est blanche” and “Der Schnee ist weiss” express that same proposition, and are therefore synonymous. This Proposition Theory fits the various “meaning facts” well, since “proposition” is essentially another word for “meaning.” But critics have questioned whether it explains the meaning facts satisfactorily, or indeed at all.

When this book began, the topics of reference and meaning were not separate, because the most common naive idea people have about meaning is that meaning is reference. In chapter 1 we disparaged the commonsensical but untenable Referential Theory of Meaning. So we must now confront meaning directly, and look at some more sophisticated theories of meaning.

Like any theory, a theory of meaning has to have a proprietary set of data. What are the primary data for a theory of meaning? I will refer to them corporately as “the meaning facts.”

First, as we emphasized in chapter 1, there is meaningfulness itself. Some strings of marks or noises in the air are just strings of marks or noises in the air, whereas others—particularly whole sentences—are meaningful. What is the difference? Perhaps that is the basic question for the theory of meaning.
Second, we sometimes say that two distinct expressions are synonymous. Third, we sometimes say of a single expression that it is ambiguous, that is, that it has more than one meaning. (So expressions and meanings are not correlated one to one.) Fourth, we sometimes say that one expression’s meaning is contained in that of another, as female and deer are contained in the meaning of “doe.” An important special case here is that of one sentence’s entailing another: “Harold is fat and Ben is stupid” entails “Ben is stupid.” (There is joint entailment too: “Grannie is either in the holding cell or in court already” and “Grannie is not in the holding cell” together entail “Grannie is in court already,” even though neither sentence alone entails that.)

There are more exotic meaning facts as well. For example, some disputes or alleged disputes are merely verbal or “only semantic,” unlike substantive disagreements over fact. X and Y do not disagree about what actually happened; they dispute only over whether what happened counts as a “so-and-so.” Onlookers say, “Oh, they’re just talking past each other.” (That happens a lot in philosophy.)

In stating the foregoing meaning facts, I have at least half-heartedly tried to avoid “reification” of things called meanings; that is, talking about “meanings” as if they were individual things like shoes or socks. I have talked of sentences having such features as being meaningful, being synonymous, being ambiguous, though I did eventually slip into alluding to “meanings.” I could have reified throughout, and said “has a meaning” instead of “is meaningful,” “have the same meaning” instead of “are synonymous,” and so on, or perhaps even used explicit quantifier expressions, as in “There is a meaning that the sentence has” and “There exists a meaning that is common to each of these sentences.” Philosophers have made an issue of this.

Let us use the term “entity theory” to mean a theory that officially takes meanings to be individual things. And there is some considerable support for entity theories in the way we ordinarily talk. We not only seem to refer to things called meanings using the word as a common noun, but we seem to use quantifier expressions in that connection. We sometimes even seem to count them: “This word has four different meanings.” So it is not unnatural to turn first to entity theories.

There are at least two different kinds of entities that meanings might be taken to be. First, one could take the entities to be mental items. Theories of that kind are sometimes called ideational theories.

**IDEATIONAL THEORIES**

The whipping boy here is usually John Locke (1690/1955), since Locke seems to have held that the meanings of linguistic expressions are ideas in the mind. On this sort of view, what it is for a string of marks or noises to be meaningful is for the string to express, or somehow significantly correspond to, a content-bearing mental state that the speaker is in, an idea, an image, or perhaps a thought or a belief. What is characteristic of ideational theories as
I am using the term is that the mental states in question are actual states of particular people at particular times.

If a string is meaningful in that it expresses an idea, one may then say that for two expressions to be synonymous is for them to express the same idea. For an expression to be ambiguous is for there to be more than one idea that it could express, and so on. And regarding the phenomenon of merely verbal disagreement, the ideational theorist may say: It is not that one party has one thought and the other has a different, conflicting thought; they both have the same thought, but are confusingly putting it in different words that sound incompatible.

So an ideational theory seems to give us an intuitive way of expressing our meaning facts more precisely. Nonetheless ideational theories have not been popular in this or the past century (though we shall see in chapter 7 that Paul Grice defends a descendant of one). Here are several of the reasons for their disrepute.

**Objection 1**

If an ideational theory is to be precise enough to test, it must (eventually) specify what sort of mental entity an “idea” is. And then it will run into trouble. Mental images will not do at all, as a matter of fact, for images are more detailed than meanings. (An image of a dog is not just, generically, of a dog, but of a dog of some particular shape and size, possibly of a particular breed; an image of a triangle is of some particular type of triangle, equilateral or right or whatever.) A better candidate would be a more abstract mental “concept,” but that suggestion would be circular until someone managed to tell us what a “concept” is, independently of the notion of meaning. Also, a concept such as that of dog or triangle is not true or false on its own, and so cannot serve as the meaning of a complete sentence.

A whole thought might do, as the meaning of a complete sentence. But not every sentence expresses anyone’s actual thought. And if “thought” is meant in a more abstract sense, as it was by Frege, then we are talking about a very different sort of theory (see below).

**Objection 2**

As with the Referential Theory, there are just too many words that have no particular mental images or contents associated with them: “is,” “and,” “of.” Indeed, if images are what are on offer, there are certainly words that psychologically could not have images associated with them, for example “chiliagon” or “nonentity,” and even when a word does have an associated image, as “red” does, we do not always call that image to mind in the everyday course of understanding the word as it goes by; indeed, we may virtually never call it to mind.
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**OBJECTION 3**

Meaning is a public, intersubjective, social phenomenon. An English word has the meaning it does for the entire community of English speakers, even if some members of that community happen not to understand that word. But ideas, images, and feelings in the mind are not intersubjective in that way; they are subjective, held only in the minds of individual persons, and they differ from person to person depending on one’s total mental state and background. Therefore, meanings are not ideas in the mind. (One might reply by appealing to what is common to all English speakers’ ideas of “dog,” say, but what is common to all “dog” ideas is not itself an idea but a type of idea, a universal or an abstract “quality” in the sense of chapter 1.)

**OBJECTION 4**

There are meaningful sentences that do not express any actual idea or thought or mental state. For, as we saw in chapter 1, there are quite long and complicated sentences of English that have never been uttered, and some of those will never be uttered. (Of course, as soon as I gave you an example of one, it was no longer an example of one, because as soon as I had written it down, it became a sentence that had been uttered. But we can extrapolate; there are more where my fanciful Hitler sentence came from.) So there are sentences that are or would be perfectly meaningful but whose contents have never been thought by anyone or even occurred to anyone. Thus, there are meaningful sentences that do not correspond to any actual mental entities.

Much more commonly in this century, the entities invoked by entity theories of meaning have been abstract rather than mental. The meanings of sentences in particular have been called “propositions” (as by Russell, we saw in chapter 2).

**The Proposition Theory**

Like ideas, these abstract items are “language-independent” in that they are not tied to any particular natural language. But unlike ideas, they are also people-independent. Mental entities depend upon the minds in which they inhere; a mental state has to be somebody’s mental state, a state of some particular person’s mind at a particular time. Propositions are entirely general and, if you like, eternal. (Russell himself had little further to say about their nature; his colleague G. E. Moore was clearer and more forthcoming, or at least more forthright. ¹ Frege had previously constructed quite an elegant Proposition Theory, but seems to have held that there is nothing to understanding what a proposition is but understanding the role played by “propositions” in the theory.)

Consider a possible reply to objection 4 above: someone might try to save the ideational theory by suggesting that we need not restrict ourselves to
actual ideas; we can appeal to merely possible ideas—ideas that someone might have or might have had. But that would be to posit abstract contents that are possible contents of thought but are not related to anyone's actual thoughts. Enter the proposition theorist: “Right, let’s call such thinkables ‘propositions.’” And so (if the ideational theorist does make the move under discussion), the ideational view simply collapses into the Propositional Theory.

The Propositional Theory offers a graphic picture. Suppose we have one string of words, $S$, that is meaningful, alongside another string, $g$, that is only gibberish. What is the difference? According to Russell and Moore, it is that there is an abstract content or proposition, call it $P$, to which $S$ stands in a certain special relation. $S$ is a sentence of a particular language. Poor $g$ does not bear that relation to any such item. The relation is often called *expression*; philosophers commonly talk of sentences expressing propositions. (Though here the term is more bloodless than in ideational theories. Ideational theorists think of sentences almost as being pushed out from inside us by the pressure of our thoughts, but propositions are abstract, changeless and powerless and do not push or pull.) So $S$ is meaningful in virtue of expressing the particular proposition $P$; $g$’s failing is that it expresses no proposition at all.

The other meaning facts are neatly depicted from the present point of view. For sentences $S_1$ and $S_2$ to be synonymous is just for $S_1$ and $S_2$ to express the same proposition. They are distinct linguistic expressions—they could be different expressions in one and the same natural language or they could be corresponding expressions from different languages. What they have in common is solely that they bear the expressing relation to the same proposition.

So too for ambiguity. A sentence $S$ is ambiguous if and only if there are at least two distinct propositions $P_1$ and $P_2$, and the single expression $S$ bears the expressing relation to each of $P_1$ and $P_2$. In the case of merely verbal disputes, we can say that the parties do not disagree over any proposition; they are merely using different forms of words to express the same proposition, and the particular forms of words look as though they are in conflict even though they are not.

We know some positive things about what propositions are supposed to be, besides their being expressed by sentences. They are identifiable in terms of “that” clauses: we speak of the proposition that snow is white, and dedicate ourselves to the proposition that all men [sic] are created equal. “Snow is white,” “La neige est blanche” and “Der Schnee ist weiss” are synonymous because each of them expresses the proposition that snow is white. Although what follows the “that” clause is just another sentence of one particular natural language, the one we happen to be speaking, the function of the “that”—creating indirect discourse—is to free the reference to the proposition in question from its particular expression.

Propositions are also objects of mental states. People all over the world may believe that Asian markets are collapsing, doubt that Asian markets are collapsing, hope or fear that Asian markets are collapsing. Here too, the
“that” serves to remove the implication that they all thought that thought in English. They could have thought it in any language; it would still be true that they believed, doubted or whatever that Asian markets are collapsing.

Further, propositions are the fundamental bearers of truth and falsity. When a sentence is true/false, it is so only because the proposition it expresses is true/false. One argument for this claim is that sentences change their truth-values from time to time and from context to context.

(1) The present Queen of England is bald.

We believe (1) to be false, assuming that Elizabeth Windsor is not following Russell’s advice and wearing a wig. But what about the other queens, past or future, who may have been or may be bald? If (1) had been uttered during the reign of a previous queen who was bald, it would have been true, and if it should be uttered decades from now during the reign of a subsequent queen, it might be true or false. So whether (1) is false or true depends on when it is uttered. What makes a particular utterance of a sentence true or false is the proposition it expresses on that occasion. The reason (1) changes its truth-value is that it expresses different propositions on different utterance occasions. Sentences derive their truth-values from propositions; propositions’ truth-values are permanent.

Most Proposition Theorists hold that propositions have internal structure; they are composed of abstract conceptual parts. The word “snow” is a meaningful expression, but it is not meaningful in virtue of expressing a proposition; just by itself it does not express a full proposition. Only a sentence expresses a proposition or, as they used to say in my grammar school days, a complete thought. “Snow” does not express a complete thought, but it expresses something that is part of many thoughts—a concept, or a type, or an “idea” in the abstract rather than the mental sense. “Concept” is the usual term used to mean an equally abstract constituent of a larger abstract proposition.

There are “meaning facts” about the parts or constituents of sentences as well, and they can be treated analogously. Words that are synonymous with “snow” can be said to express the same concept; if “snow” is ambiguous, as it is, it is ambiguous in virtue of expressing different concepts: Sometimes it means the chilly white stuff that falls from the sky and at other times it means a certain controlled substance.

The Proposition Theory avoids all four of our objections to ideational theories, though one more narrowly than the others. We have already seen that it eludes objection 4. It avoids 1 because propositions and concepts are not mental entities, and it avoids 3 because, unlike mental entities, propositions and concepts are intersubjective, independent of particular people, languages, and even whole cultures.

It only barely evades objection 2. The Proposition theorist can insist that words like “is,” “and,” “of,” “chiliagon,” and “nonentity” express concepts
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("chiliagon" especially, which is a well-defined geometric term). But as I said in response to objection 1, if this is not to sound empty and perhaps even circular, the proposition theorist will have to give us some further characterization of the relevant concepts, one that does not quietly presuppose some notion of linguistic meaning. (We shall see in chapter 10 that a sophisticated version of the Proposition Theory can do this.)

The Proposition view is the leading entity theory of meaning. Like any theory of meaning it aims at explaining the meaning facts. It attempts to do that by positing a certain range of entities; that is how we often explain things, especially in science. We posit subatomic particles, unobservable entities of a certain range and kind, to explain the behavior of observable chemical substances and the ratios in which they combine.

A first problem for the theory as stated so far is created by a sort of meaning fact that I have not mentioned up till now. Some philosophers consider this sort even more important than all the ones listed above: We understand a sentence $S$, in an immediate way, whereas we do not understand a gibberish string of words. Some strings of words are intelligible and other strings are not. This brings another term into the relation. Till now, the Proposition Theory has focused just on linguistic expressions and on propositions, with the expressing relation defined on them. Now it must let in human beings.

What is it for a person to understand a sentence $S$? The classic Moorean answer is: for that person to bear a certain relation to a proposition and to know that $S$ expresses that proposition. This relation Moore called “grasping” (or sometimes “apprehending”), To understand $S$ is to grasp some proposition $P$ and to know that $S$ expresses $P$.

The Proposition Theory too is congenial to common sense. It is easy to agree that certain sentences of various different languages all have something (their meanings) in common, a language-independent content, and it is easy and natural to call that content “the proposition expressed by” the various different sentences. Moreover, the Proposition Theory is a handy tool for describing and discussing the other sorts of “meaning phenomena” we have mentioned, to say nothing of entailment, meaning inclusion, antonymy, redundancy, and more. Finally, as we shall see in chapters 10 and 11, the Proposition Theory lends itself to elegant mathematical elaboration, in the hands of “possible worlds” semanticists and intensional logicians. But, as always, there are problems.

**Objection 1**

We have said that “propositions” are abstract entities, even though sentences are now being said to “express” them rather than to name them as in the Referential Theory. Considered as entities, these abstract items are somewhat weird. They are not located anywhere in space, and, since they could not be created or destroyed, they are also temporally eternal or at least everlasting. They existed long before any living being did, even though their contents
have to do with highly specific states of human affairs, such as Fred’s having
downed four quick Malaga Coolers at He’s Not Here during the early evening
of Tuesday 19 September 1995. The propositions will exist long after the last
sentient creature is dead. And (necessarily, since they are not in spacetime)
they have no causal properties; they do not make anything happen.

A REPLY

It is right and proper to be wary of positing weird entities. But perhaps this
direct appeal to “Occam’s Razor” is premature. The medieval philosopher
William of Occam told us not to multiply posited entities beyond explana-
tory necessity. But we could know that propositions were unnecessary for
explanation only if we had an alternative theory of meaning that explained
the meaning phenomena just as well but without dragging in propositions.
And (so far) we have no such competitor.

OBJECTION 2

“Propositions” are in a sense unfamiliar and alien to our experience. I hear
or see words and I understand them, but this is hardly, or seems hardly, a
case of my doing something called “grasping” that puts me in touch with a
supra-empirical nonspatial, indestructible, eternal object. (Bring up spooky
mood music.)

MOORE’S REPLY

It is quite plain, I think, that when we understand the meaning of a sen-
tence, something else does happen in our minds besides the mere hearing
of the words of which the sentence is composed. You can easily satisfy
yourselves of this by contrasting what happens when you hear a sentence,
which you do understand, from what happens when you hear a sentence
which you do not understand . . . . Certainly in the first case, there occurs,
beside the mere hearing of the words, another act of consciousness—an
apprehension of their meaning, which is absent in the second case. And
it is no less plain that the apprehension of the meaning of one sentence
with one meaning, differs in some respect from the apprehension of
another sentence with a different meaning . . . . There certainly are such
things as the two different meanings apprehended. And each of these
two meanings is what I call a proposition.

(1953/1962: 73–4)

And, he might add, if you say you do not know what he is talking about, you
are a liar. Grasping is something you have directly experienced.
A DIFFERENT REPLY

Granting the premise instead of challenging it, one might point out that it is common not only in philosophy but in science to explain very familiar phenomena in terms of very unfamiliar, perhaps quite arcane phenomena. That is nothing new or unusual.

OBJECTION 3

From Gilbert Harman (1967–8). The Proposition Theory does not in fact explain anything; it merely repeats the data in a fancier jargon. (“Why do ‘Snow is white’ and ‘La neige est blanche’ have the same meaning?”—“Because they express the same proposition.”—“Oh, I see.”) It sounds as though the phrase “expresses a proposition” is just a fancier way of saying “is meaningful.” At least until we are shown some independent way of understanding proposition talk, the suspicion will remain that it is only a pretentious way of re-expressing the meaning facts. Compare Molière’s physician on opium and “dormitive virtue.”

REPLY

We need not be too daunted by this objection either. For when a Proposition Theory is elaborated and refined, complete with a notion of a person’s “grasping” a proposition as well as that of a sentence’s expressing one, the apparatus has at least a bit of predictive power and so (to that extent) at least a bit of explanatory power. Whether the resulting story is plausible is a different question. But perhaps Harman was really getting at the next objection.

OBJECTION 4

Whatever meaning is, it plays a dynamic role in human society. Some of your behavior is causally the result of my saying certain words that mean what they do, and some of my behavior results from your saying meaningful words likewise. Legal decisions in capital cases sometimes turn on the meanings of words, and so on. Thus meaning, whatever it is, must have some causal power (some push and pull, some punch, some biff). But propositions, as entirely abstract entities, precisely do not have causal powers. They sit quiescently and uselessly outside spacetime, and do nothing. So it is hard to see how propositions could figure in the explanation of human linguistic behavior or could in any other way help to account for the dynamic social role of meaning. And therefore they seem to be unnecessary posits after all.

REPLY

Even if propositions do not help in the explanation of human behavior, human behavior is not the only thing that needs explaining. The “meaning
facts” themselves are our primary data, and pace Harman, propositions still help to explain those. The “ordinary language” philosophers of the 1950s drew a moral from early versions of objections 1 and 4: that what we need is a theory that explains meaning phenomena in terms that do connect up to human behavior. (Remember that human behavior involves actual physical motion; meaning must somehow contribute to literal push and pull.) More specifically, we need to understand meaning in terms of language use. Ever since, philosophers have spoken of “use” theories of meaning. But we are little the wiser, for there are many different kinds of modes of “use,” some of which are obviously irrelevant to meaning in the characteristically linguistic sense. Different specifically linguistic conceptions of “use” lead to different and competing theories of meaning.

Summary

- A theory of meaning must explain the “meaning facts.”
- “Meanings” have often been taken to be entities or individual things.
- Ideational theorists contend that meanings are particular ideas in people’s minds.
- But several objections show that, at best, meanings would have to be more abstract: types of idea, not actual thoughts in the minds of particular people.
- Proposition theorists take meanings to be abstract things in themselves.
- But critics have questioned whether the Proposition Theory explains the meaning facts satisfactorily (or at all).

Questions

1. Is there more to be said in favor of the Ideational Theory? And/or can you defend it against one or more of our objections?
2. Does the Proposition Theory really explain the meaning facts? Why or why not?
3. Defend the Proposition Theory more thoroughly against our objections. Or raise a new objection of your own.

Further reading

- Locke’s Ideational Theory is discussed in Bennett (1971).
- Frege (1918/1956) criticized ideational theories in favor of the Proposition Theory. Wittgenstein (1953) criticized them from a very different perspective (see chapter 6), as did Waismann (1965a).
- A classic Proposition Theory was offered by Russell (1919/1956).
• For some discussion of propositions and their relations to sentences and to utterances, see Cartwright (1962) and Lemmon (1966).
• Quinean criticism of the Proposition Theory is best summed up by Gilbert Harman (1967–8), particularly pp. 124–7 (pp. 141–7 are also relevant). Lycan (1974) is a rejoinder on the theory’s behalf. See also Loux (1998: ch. 4).