

A QUEST FOR MEANING - AN APPROACH

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The phrase "Theory of Meaning" occupies a pivotal place in recent philosophy. This phrase can be used at least in four different senses. They are as follows :

- i) A philosophical analysis of the concept of meaning that is, a discursive account which explains the notion of meaning in terms of other concepts.
- ii) An account of the meanings of all the expressions of a particular language. It will be a complete lexicon of all the sentences, phrases and words of a given language.
- iii) An axiomatically systematised theory for a specific language which will yield theorems and sentences.
- iv) A philosophical discussion as to what form any theory of the third kind must take.

This paper attempts to do three main things. First, it outlines the reasons for discrediting the first and second kind of enterprise. Second, it discusses the nature and the need for and constraints of a theory of meaning in the third sense. Third, it shows how a theory of meaning in the fourth sense does in a better way what the theory of meaning in the first sense intended to do; viz, it unravels the mystery of meaning.

In conclusion, it tries to sketch how philosophers holding opposite views as to what form a theory of meaning should take, share the fundamental belief that the study of meaning coincides with the study of reality. That is how the theory of meaning finally merges into metaphysics, justifying its own claimed centrality to philosophy as a whole.

I

Traditionally, the questions that are raised as regards meaning include the following queries. 'What, if anything is meaning'? 'Are these meanings apart from things in 'the world which we talk about' ? These problems have come to be part of theory of meaning by a variety of routes.

One traditional attempt that we find is the ideational theory of meaning. This theory holds that the meaning of a word is the idea casually associated with the word in the minds of speakers and hearers of language. This theory finds explicit expression in the writings of John Locke.

Words in their primary and immediate signification, stand for nothing but the ideas in the mind of him that uses them.¹

An association between the word and the idea is created through the repeated use of a given word to signify a certain idea, so that when someone else utters the word, the idea we associate with it will be called to mind. For successful communication the speaker and his audience must associate sufficiently similar ideas with the words in question. And this will happen when they speak the same language.

It is on this point that Frege criticised Locke's ideational theory of meaning. This theory makes genuine communication and disputes over the truth of statements impossible. It conflates also the subjective aspects of meaning with its public ones. For example, utterance of the sentence "Pegasus does not exist" is likely to evoke images in a horsemen quite different from those it would evoke in an ontologist. Yet both the horseman and the ontologist can agree on what has been said about its truth. Moreover, without a distinction between subjective and objective meaning, logic would be paralysed; for in order to evaluate inferences, it must be possible to paraphrase sentences while preserving their logically essential features.

There is another attempt to give a philosophical theory of meaning which holds that all words are names. This shows that words and descriptive phrases have a two fold meaning viz., meaning in denotation and in connotation. They denote the things or persons that they stand for. And also they connote or signify the attributes by virtue of possessing which the thing(s) or person(s) qualify to be the denotation of these words.

But this type of approach is not the desired one because if every single word is a name then a sentence composed of five words such as 'two is an even number' will also be a list of five objects. But as we all know this is not true. So that notion of *having meaning* is different from the notion of *standing for* an object. Further, we feel tempted to ask what will be the denotation or connotation of a sentence which too surely *has* meaning?

This necessitates the distinction between sense and reference. Frege introduces these notions to explain why, certain statements such as 'The morning star is the evening star' are informative while others for instance 'The morning star is the morning star' are trivial. Thus, although 'the morning star', 'the evening star', refer to the same planet venus, yet these terms have different senses associated with them - as is evidenced by the fact that people can understand these terms and still fail to realise that they refer to the same object.

So there must be something besides reference and Frege calls it 'sense'. In Frege's view a sense is an object and abstract entity which we "grasp" when we understand the word with which it is associated. Each meaningful expression must have a sense although some such as "Pegasus" and "the Present King of France" can fail to have references.

Sentences also have senses and references. While the references of a sentence is shown by its truth-value, the sense of a sentence is a thought. To grasp the thought is to understand the sentence, although this thought is not a private mental entity but something objective and sharable.

Frege based his theory of the relationship between the meaning of a compound expression and the meaning of its components on the model of mathematical functions. Just as a function always yields the same value when applied to the same argument, a compound expression retains the same reference under all replacements of its components which leave their references fixed. If we replace "evening star" in the earlier statement by "Venus" we obtain a new sentence, "The morning star is the venus" which have the same reference as in earlier statements. But all these statements have one thing common and that is, they are all true. Frege thus argued that sentences refer to truth - values, for they remain the same under all replacements of components by co-referential expressions.

Frege further held that a name refers to an object and a predicate refers to a concept. Proper names, sentences, all count as complete or saturated expressions while predicative or functional expressions, such as "... is red", "... is greater than" are incomplete or unsaturated expressions.

The novelty of Frege's doctrines lies in the fact that besides recognising material and mental world he recognises a third realm where "sense" belongs.

It is on the above ground that Quine remarks that entities of the realm of sense are "creatures of darkness". This realm of sense may lead one to a commitment to an ontology of meanings. Here, 'meaning' is treated once again like an entity. He asks "what sort of things are meanings"? Is it an entity of a special sort? He shows that the search for 'meaning' is 'a misguided effort due to our object oriented thinking. We are always habituated to think that for every word there is a corresponding object. And this habit leads one to think that 'meaning' is an object in between the words and the things of the world they are used to talk about.

As he comments :

The uncritical acceptance of propositions as meanings of sentences is one manifestation of a widespread myth of meaning. It is as if there were a gallery of ideas, and each idea were tagged with the expression that means it, each proposition, in particular, with an appropriate sentence,²

What is more important for Quine is the notion of synonymy because whenever we *explain* the meaning of phrases or words or sentences we *use* other sentences, words or phrases. So the correct question to ask is, "Does this expression mean the same as that?" Once we can formulate the same saying relationship between the right bunch of sentences and the conditions for their truth or falsity, 'meaning' evaporates automatically.

For, meaning is what a sentence shares with its translation. In '*Word and Object*', Quine formulates the above point in the form of the elaborate theory of radical translation. This is his idealised picture of how a certain foreigner goes about compiling a translation manual for a native language with which he has *no* previous acquaintance, simply on the basis of the sounds uttered by the native users of the language and their non-linguistic behaviour in relation to

various observable situations of the world. When there are changes in the environment he takes the help of a new word that he learns and watches whether a native speaker assents or dissents to his remark. For example, when a rabbit runs by, the native say 'Gavagai'. The translator makes a note of this and tries to find out whether his remark 'Gavagai' in these situations elicit assent or dissent. Quine gives a technical name to this assent or dissent as 'stimulus meaning'. When the stimulation prompts affirmation it is affirmative stimulus meaning and when it elicits negation it is negative stimulus meaning.

A new point emerges from the above here in case of 'Gavagai', there always remains the possibility that one can equate the sentence with such terms (in one's own language) as 'rabbit', 'rabbit - part', 'rabbit - state', etc.

This (is) the inscrutability of reference applied to ourselves and it (makes) non-sense of reference.³

This stimulus meaning gives no guarantee as to what precisely the speaker really means when he utters 'Gavagai', for no hypothesis fits his response *uniquely*, alternatives are never totally eliminated. From this follows the 'indeterminacy of translation', that is two languages may be translated into one another in many ways and there is no reason to accept one and reject the other. This point strengthens Quine's thesis again that meaning is relative to some translational scheme.

This view of Quine may be described as a sort of holism which treats language as a whole.

Not only Quine but Austin also shows in one of his essays how philosophers are committing the fallacy of 'Nothing- in-particular,' when they are trying to answer the generic question, what is the meaning of any word? While discussing different questions, they often gradually slide towards non-sensical questions. For example, while analysing the sentence, 'what is the meaning of (the word) "rat"', 'what is the meaning of (the word) "mat"', they even go further and ask what is the "meaning" of a word? which is nothing but a pseudo - question. So this type of question should be avoided as it brings with its train a batch of pseudo-problems.

The above should make it clear why philosophical theories of meaning which make meaning entities of a special sort, whether subjective or

objective do not succeed. Another theory is offered under the first kind of enterprise where meaning is treated as an act that we perform by using words (or making gestures or by drawing pictures etc.) 'To mean', is taken as an intentional verb. This theory is known as the communication - intentional theory of meaning.

One insight upon which the classical ideational theory was based is that the meaning of an expression must be a function of what a *person* means by an expression. Grice explores from a different point of view, the possibility of reducing the former to the latter. He argues that a linguistic meaning is a variety of a more general sort of meaning which he terms non-natural meaning. Non-natural meaning is contrasted with a natural sense of meaning in which, some natural phenomenon may be said to mean something, e.g. "Those spots mean (meant) measles." According to Grice what a person means to do falls within the category of natural meaning and provides the requisite grounding for non-natural meaning. As what a person means to do is what he intends. Thus the speaker by his utterance intends that the hearer should be able to know his particular intention. So, here the intention is always audience directed. To Grice, this utterance is something which is executed by the speaker, and this need not be always linguistic activity but it may be non-linguistic such as certain gestures or movements. So, in this theory non-linguistic behaviour is also taken into account.

But it is doubtful whether in this sense a systematic theory of meaning can be or needs be given. This theory connects the concept of meaning essentially with the concept of 'intention-to-communicate', without paying need to the principle that if a language has to be learnable the meaning of an expression in a language must be independent of the psychological states of particular speakers.

Grice's theory not only connects the concept of meaning with that of communication-intention it also appeals to a concomitant variation to obtain in general between a particular proposition and the response; between the response which the utterer intends to elicit and what is meant by *x*.

The difficulty that Grice faces is the following. A Gricean analysis of 'meaning' achieves its aims of avoiding reference to rules of language precisely by accepting the individual utterance by a particular speaker as fundamental.

But our everyday use of 'meaning', on the other hand, involves an *appeal* to language, conceived as something which determines meaning in general, independent of the intentions of the speakers. As Paul Ziff remarks:

Grice's analysis rings untrue. It was bound to, his alloy lacks the basic ingredient of meaning a set of protective devices. The syntactic and semantic structure of any natural language is essentially recursive in character. What any given sentence means depends on what (various) other sentences in the language mean.⁴

So the distinction that we promised to show in the first kind of enterprise now emerges quite clearly. On the one hand we have a theory which explains meaning as doing something and on the other hand, meaning as the objective meant, be it a mental or an objective entity of some non-material sort.

One of the ways in which we may try to have a theory of the second kind is the following. We try to give an account of the meaning of *all* the expressions, that is, of all sentences, phrases and words of a certain language. It will be like cataloguing of all the expressions of a given language, which are meaningful and for each of them specifying what it means. But such a theory of meaning cannot be completed as terms and sentences in a language are potentially infinite in number.

This conception of meaning describes 'meaning' in the same way that a tourist-guide book does while indicating the meanings of different phrases to a foreigner. But is this also not the sense that is needed for a systematic account of meaning. This conception is rejected outright as it does not yield any insight into the structure of sentences, the minimum requirement that any theory of meaning must fulfill. In the same fashion as lexicography does. But what we require here is not any dictionary based theory of meaning.

In this connection we may recall a helpful analogy given by Wittgenstein and Dummett. The meaning of an expression is not some independent thing (mental, external), it is not something that a word has, it is like direction of a line or a role of a chess-piece. Just as it is futile to search for the role of a power of chess-piece either on the chess-board or in the mind of a chess-player, similarly it is futile to search for meaning of word. The best way to state or describe the role of a chess- piece is to state the rules of its permissible moves.

Similarly the best way to "give" the meaning of a word or of sentence using word is to systematically describe their use. We utter them, we hear them (series of linguistic sounds) we perform thing with them (promising); we get hurt or elated by them. But what is most important for our purpose is that we *understand* them.

II

What seems to be necessary now is a new general strategy for the application of formal semantics to problem of meaning in languages. The problem that confronts us now is, how new sentences can be built from a finite vocabulary of the language and how a speaker of the language attaches a sense to a sentence which he has never encountered before.

Davidson has shown how we can avoid most of the problems and get a theory of meaning in terms of the concept of truth. The theory which he offers is known as formal semantic theory. This theory gives meaning in terms of T. Sentences. It states the truth-conditions in terms of the concepts used by the sentence itself.

The aim of his theory is the discovery of a systematic way of mapping the totality of sentences of a given language into some set of T-sentences. They take the following form : 'Snow is white' is true iff snow is white. This is a statement of the form 'S is true iff P' the sentence which replaces P is S itself. So, understanding P requires no appeal to concepts which are not required in understanding S.

What Davidson offers us is a theory which will specify the set of axioms determining the primitive words and the semantic upshot of the permissible ways of forming phrases and sentences out of these primitive words. And this theory also presents a method for deciding, of any given sentence, what its meaning is. A theory which satisfies the above two conditions according to Davidson, shows that language it describes is learnable and scrutable.⁵ Not only this, here we are not appealing to any unanalysed semantical notion such as those of meaning or denotation.

The theory that Davidson offers can be described as a theoretical representation of a practical ability; it is a theory, the knowledge of which enables one to use language.

At this juncture, Dummett raises certain issues. They are as follows :

- i) The issue between modest and full-blooded theories of meaning.
- ii) The issue between holistic and non-holistic theories.
- iii) The issue between realistics and anti-realistics.

These will be taken up one after another. But first of all it is necessary here to see what Dummett means by a theory of meaning.

In all his writings the point that Dummett always emphasizes is that theory of meaning must be a theory of understanding. It must give an account of all that we need to know in order to know a language. To carry out the above aim Dummett distinguishes between two components in our knowledge of any language and correspondingly two tasks of a complete theory of meaning.

One who has the capacity to understand any sentence of a given language (e.g. the English sentence, "Elephants are fatter than horses") must possess two types of cognitive ability.

i) He must have a grip over the primitive concept expressed by the word (e.g. he must know how to tell an elephant from a horse).

ii) He must be able to associate the right words of the given language with the right concepts and be able to work out the meanings of the sentences on the basis of the knowledge of the meaning of the words.

The first capacity is obviously not enough for our knowledge of a particular language. We can imagine someone having a concept but lacking any linguistic means of expressing it or at least lacking knowledge of the given language. As we all know, to have the concept of an elephant is not to know all words of all language which expresses that concept. But it is no doubt a necessary condition for competence in any language that we should have command over the concepts expressible in that language. The second type of ability actually rests on the above first type. It is only as it were *after* we have

earned the concept of an 'elephant', a 'horse', and of 'being fatter than that', we can proceed to associate these concepts with the English words, 'elephant' horse, 'fatter than' etc.; then we learn the sentence forming operations and then teach ourselves how to work out the meaning of whole sentence using these words and operations in different possible arrangements.

It is beyond controversy that a theory of meaning must give an account of the second kind of capacity. It must explain which concepts a competent speaker or interpreter of a given language associates with which primitive words and sentence forming operations of that language and also systematically explain how on the basis of the meanings of these primitive words and operation the meaning of any sentence of the language can be worked out. But the issue is whether that is enough. A theory of meaning which does only this job, that is, which gives an account of only the second kind of ability is a '*Modest theory*'. That theory, which purports to explain both the steps involved in our knowledge of a language that is, which tries to capture what it is to grasp the basic concepts expressed by the primitive words on top of *explaining the specific linguistic competence* is a full blooded theory.

And Dummett labelled Davidsonian theory of meaning as modest one. He aspires to prove that a modest theory of meaning can never amount to a theory of understanding. It will be intelligible only to someone who has already grasped the basic concepts.

Moreover, knowledge of the truth of a T. Sentence is not sufficient for knowledge of meaning or understanding. If knowledge of T-sentence as being derived from the axioms of the truth-theory is what is required, we must have the right kind of knowledge of the axioms themselves. And *that* cannot be provided by the truth theory itself, as that theory is only a modest theory. If a theory which yields theorem is like "Snow is White" is true iff snow is white, then such a theory is hardly better than a translation manual. Here one is presupposing a prior understanding of the metalanguage. So a theory of meaning of this kind merely shows what it is to have an interpretation of one language via an understanding of another.

A possible defense in favour of holism can be shown here. One may say that here in this truth - condition theory what we are expecting is knowledge of the theory of truth as a whole and not for each sentence taken separately. What

the theory offers is a theoretical model of a practical ability.

It is at this point Dummett shows that one becomes aware of the connections between truth-condition theory of meaning and holistic view of language. It is not an atomistic conception of language where meanings belong to the words which form sentences but a holistic view where nothing is specified about what a knowledge of the propositions expressed by the axioms consists in. On such a view, there is no answer to the question what is it that a speaker understands when he knows a sentence to be true. One can only say that knowledge of the theory of truth consists in an ability to speak the language but fails to supply the learnability of language. Thus holism gives no account of the specific abilities of speakers with respect to the individual sentences, and no account of their specific contents.

Against this it may be said that the theory of truth does tell us something about the function of each individual sentence. And here it will be a molecularistic theory which maintains that it is the sentence which is the primary unit of meaning. But this is also not the desired way for construing theory of truth. Because, such an account will leave no room for mistakes. As Dummett remarks :

A theory of meaning based on a holistic view, which has no criterion for a speaker's associating a specific meaning, save its inclination to hold it true or false, and does not therefore purport to give an account of his understanding of that sentence but only of the entire language, can give no determinate content to the notion of a mistake, which it invokes only to account for the lack of fit between the theory of truth and the judgments actually made by the speakers.⁶

After giving his views about holism Dummett enters into the debate between realism and anti-realism as reflected in the above of the key-concepts in a theory of meaning.

Realism consists in a belief that for any statement of a given language there must be something in virtue of which the statement is either true or false. Here truth is the central notion and it is only on the basis of it that we can justify the idea that truth and falsity play an essential role in determining the meaning of statement.

Dummett has shown that the above conception is generally accepted by every one for its intuitive obviousness. Here the notion of truth is taken for granted and we are explaining our understanding of a sentence on the basis of it. As long as one takes the above view of truth for granted, it seems obvious that it is in terms of it that meaning must be explained. But the moment we try to analyse the notion, this obviousness starts to dwindle. The difficulty arises when one asks, what it is to ascribe to someone a knowledge of the condition which must obtain for a sentence to be true. If the case is such that the speaker can manifest his understanding with the help of verbal explanation then no problem arises. But there are certain primitive parts of our language for which verbal explanation is not sufficient. Now, the question is how is this implicit knowledge to be manifested. We may say that this implicit knowledge is manifested in the speaker's ability to recognise the conditions for a sentence to be true, as obtaining when it obtains. But this ability cannot be attributed to a speaker unless the speaker has some effective procedure for placing himself in a position in which he can recognise whether or not the condition for the truth of the sentence is manifested. According to Dummett, trouble arises only when we inquire how this account can be applied. For, if truth is a possibly recognition transcendent property of a sentence, then the realist is not in a position to alter any truth conditions for such a sentence. Obviously, in face of undecidable sentences about the future qualification over unsurveyably infinite totalities, we have to drop the ideas of truth and truth conditions as key concepts in the theory of meaning. As Dummett remarks :

But even the most thorough going realist must grant that we could hardly be said to grasp what it is for a statement to be true if we had no conception of whatever how it might be known to be true, there would in such a case, be no substance to own conception of its truth condition.⁷

Dummett concludes that all this difficulty is due to our uncritical acceptance of realism with regard to all sentences of our language.

In this controversy between Dummett and Davidson, one point clearly emerges and that is, both of them consider philosophy of language in general and the theory of meaning in particular to be central to philosophy, and to be in the end the same as metaphysics.

Communication is possible because we share a common view of the world. Davidson proves by an ingenious route of reasoning that large parts of this common world-view must be true if smaller parts of it are at all to be detected as false. A theory of meaning (based on the notion of truth) while unearthing the conditions which make our linguistic intercourse possible, incidentally display this common world-view and since it is bound to be true as a whole, it actually displays the structure of the world. Sketching large features of reality by way of sketchings large features of our talk about reality is thus a royal and Davidson claims, an old path of pursuing metaphysics.⁸ For quite different reasons, Dummett thinks that the central problem of the theory of meaning, viz. the relation between truth and recognition of truth is actually the central problem of metaphysics, viz. that of realism and idealism. Thus, the study of language and meaning which started as a protest against metaphysics (with the logical positivists) is gradually revealing itself as metaphysics under a new garb. We can call it an irony of fate or, if we are friends rather than foes of metaphysics, we can call it a stroke of fortune.

NOTES and REFERENCES

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