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Introduction

One of the most venerable doctrines in the history of philosophy, linguistics, and psychology is the thesis that words are conventional signs of mental states, principally thoughts and ideas, and that meaning consists in their expression. This *expression theory of meaning*, as I call it, is firmly entrenched in our commonsense understanding of the world. But familiarity has bred complacency as well as contempt. Development of the doctrine was limited through the nineteenth century, and the twentieth century brought denunciation of the expression theory from generations of scholars. Behavioristic theories of meaning have now faded from view. But referential theories still dominate the field, despite insurmountable problems. This work is an extended effort to clarify, deepen, and defend the expression theory, thereby systematizing what is known about meaning and expression. The best way to do this, I believe, is to carry out the Gricean program, explaining what it is for words to have meaning in terms of speaker meaning and what it is for a speaker to mean something in terms of intention. To succeed in this project, we must develop the theory of thought as a fundamental mental phenomenon distinct from belief and desire, identifying ideas with parts of thoughts. This work, then, is a philosophical treatise on the foundations of semantics.

§1.1 MEANING AS THE EXPRESSION OF THOUGHT

Like many other central philosophical and scientific ideas, the expression theory was first set out by Plato (427–347 B.C.) and Aristotle (384–322 B.C.).

Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words. Just as all men have not the same writing, so all men

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have not the same speech sounds, but the mental experiences, which these directly symbolize, are the same for all, as are those things of which our experiences are the images. . . . As there are in the mind thoughts which do not involve truth or falsity, and also those which must be either true or false, so it is in speech. For truth and falsity imply combination and separation. . . . A sentence is a significant portion of speech, some parts of which have an independent meaning, that is to say, as an utterance, though not as the expression of any positive judgement. . . . Every sentence has meaning, not as being the natural means by which a physical faculty is realized, but, as we have said, by convention. Yet every sentence is not a proposition; only such are propositions as have in them either truth or falsity. Thus a prayer is a sentence, but is neither true nor false. (Aristotle, *De Interpretatione*: §§1–4)

Aristotle became “the Philosopher” during the medieval period, and his views were kept alive by Augustine (A.D. 354–430), Boethius (ca. 475–525), Avicenna (ca. 929–1037), and Ockham (ca. 1280–1349).

[A] sign is a thing which, over and above the impression it makes on the senses, causes something else to come into the mind as a consequence of itself. . . . Natural signs are those which, apart from any intention or desire of using them as signs, do yet lead to the knowledge of something else, as, for example, smoke when it indicates fire. . . . Conventional signs, on the other hand, are those which living beings mutually exchange for the purpose of showing, as well as they can, the feelings of their minds, or their perceptions, or their thoughts. Nor is there any reason for giving a sign except the desire of drawing forth and conveying into another’s mind what the giver of the sign has in his own mind. (Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*: Chapters 2.1 and 2.2)

I say vocal words are signs subordinated to mental concepts or contents. By this I do not mean that if the word ‘sign’ is taken in its proper meaning, spoken words are properly and primarily signs of mental concepts; I rather mean that words are applied in order to signify the very same things which are signified by mental concepts. Hence the concept signifies something primarily and naturally, whilst the word signifies the same thing secondarily. . . . This is what is meant by the Philosopher when he says ‘Words are signs of the impressions in the soul’. Boethius also has the same in mind when he says that words signify concepts. . . . A concept or mental impression signifies naturally whatever it does signify; a spoken or written term, on the other hand, does not signify anything except by free convention. (Ockham, *Summa Logicae* I: §1)

Three centuries later, the modern period of philosophy began with similar statements by Descartes in the *Meditations* (1641) and *Replies to Objections* (1641), Hobbes in the *Logic* (1655), and Arnauld in the *Port Royal Grammar* (1660) and *Port Royal Logic* (1662). Descartes introduced the term

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“idea” in this context, which became firmly entrenched through the enormous influence of Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690).

Man, though he have great variety of thoughts, and such from which others as well as himself might receive profit and delight; yet they are all within his own breast, invisible and hidden from others, nor can of themselves be made to appear. The comfort and advantage of society not being to be had without communication of thoughts, it was necessary that man should find out some external sensible signs, whereof those invisible ideas, which his thoughts are made up of, might be made known to others. For this purpose nothing was so fit, either for plenty or quickness, as those articulate sounds, which with so much ease and variety he found himself able to make. Thus we may conceive how *words*, which were by nature so well adapted to that purpose, came to be made use of by men as the signs of their ideas; not by any natural connexion that there is between particular articulate sounds and certain ideas, for then there would be but one language amongst all men; but by a voluntary imposition, whereby such a sound is made arbitrarily the mark of such an idea. The use, then, of words, is to be sensible marks of ideas; and the ideas they stand for are their proper and immediate signification. (Locke 1690: §3.2.1)

Words, by long and familiar use, as has been said, come to excite in men certain ideas so constantly and readily, that they are apt to suppose a natural connexion between them. But . . . every man has so inviolable a liberty to make words stand for what ideas he pleases, that no one hath the power to make others have the same ideas in their minds that he has, when they use the same words that he does. And therefore the great Augustus himself, in the possession of that power which ruled the world, acknowledged he could not make a new Latin word: which was as much as to say, that he could not arbitrarily appoint what idea any sound should be a sign of, in the mouths and common language of his subjects. It is true, common use, by a tacit consent, appropriates certain sounds to certain ideas in all languages, which so far limits the signification of that sound, that unless a man applies it to the same idea, he does not speak properly. . . . (Locke 1690: §3.2.4)

Locke’s views on the signification of ideas were repeated with very little variation or amplification for the next three centuries, principally by those who thought that they had found in the principles of association formulated by both Locke and Aristotle the fundamental laws of all mental phenomena.¹ Even those who rejected associationism accepted

1 See Condillac 1746; Hartley 1749: Chapter 1.3; J. Mill 1829, Chapter 4; Bentham 1816, 1843; Bain 1855: §67–8; and Titchener 1914: 214.

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a basically Lockean view of language.² One of the few new ideas was the late nineteenth-century distinction between sense and reference, which led to Frege's thesis that the sense of a sentence is a thought, the sense of a predicate a concept.³ Frege's identification of senses with thoughts is subject to objection, but its ability to account for the distinction between sense and reference is a major strength. J. S. Mill's similar but older distinction between connotation and denotation led to a significant competitor to the ideational theory: the view that the meaning of a word is its connotation, the property or set of properties it expresses.⁴

As this brief history indicates, the expression theory underwent little development between the third century B.C. and the first half of the twentieth century. Critics have been more inventive, developing a multitude of objections. Much of the classical criticism has centered around the notion of an idea. The expression theory is primarily, though not exclusively, an ideational theory. Ideational theorists tended to use the term "idea" inconsistently, and many definitions picked out classes of entities that did not correlate well with meanings. The term "idea" became enmeshed in wildly implausible theories such as idealism, associationism, and sensationalism. The philosophical pendulum swung hard in the opposite direction, producing the verification theory of the Vienna Circle, according to which meaning consists in verification conditions. Bertrand Russell and Wittgenstein in his early writings advocated the referential theory, identifying meaning with reference. The later Wittgensteinian dictum that "meaning is use" resonated with the behaviorist movement that was sweeping philosophy as well as psychology. The evident failure of behaviorist analyses, which was as great for semantic terms as for psychological terms, led Quine and his followers to reject as meaningless all talk of meaning as opposed to reference. The rapid progress of modern formal logic rewarded work on reference, and underscored its relative tractability.

2 See Leibniz 1709: 3.1–3.2; Reid 1764: §4.2, §5.3, §6.24; Reid 1785: 394, 477, 496–7; Brentano 1874: 198; James 1890: 427; Frege 1892a: 43; 1892b; 1918: 4–5; Husserl 1900: Investigation I; Meinong 1910: xiv–xv, 24–5, 34–6.

3 Frege 1892a: 43; 1892b; 1918: 4–5. See also Husserl 1900: Investigation I, Chapter 1, §12; Kneale & Kneale 1962: 493ff.

4 J. S. Mill 1843: §1.2.5; §1.5.2; §1.5.4. According to Kneale & Kneale 1962: 318, this distinction between "comprehension" and "extension" was first introduced by Arnauld in the *Port Royal Logic*. Hamilton introduced "intension" for "comprehension." Ockham's distinction between secondary and primary signification would seem to be an early predecessor. See Loux 1974: 6–7; Freddoso 1980: 4–5; Ockham, *Summa Logicae I*. Formally, however, Ockham had no use for the abstract objects or universals that connotative terms appear to signify secondarily.

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General arguments for eliminative materialism gained currency, leading some to reject mentalistic theories of language altogether. By the mid-1960s, the ideational theory of meaning was as dead as idealism in metaphysics.

I will not in this work attempt to refute skepticism about the existence of mental phenomena. I will take it for granted that people do have beliefs, desires, and thoughts. Let the skeptics be taken at their word that they do not really believe or mean what they are saying, and have not thought the matter through! Seriously, I believe that we have direct introspective evidence for the existence of beliefs, desires, and thoughts, and indirect evidence based on the ability of psychological hypotheses to explain and predict human behavior, including but not limited to verbal behavior. There is an impressive and rapidly expanding literature on the neurophysiological basis of psychological phenomena. The fact that there are no serious competitors to explanations of behavior in terms of mental states has been argued forcefully by Chomsky, Putnam, Fodor, and others, and many results from the burgeoning field of cognitive psychology demonstrate the power of the framework. The case for the predictive value of psychological hypotheses has not been made as thoroughly, so I will make one observation. The triumph of the Apollo moon missions was rightly attributed to the remarkable predictive power of physical theory, which enabled scientists to calculate in advance the exact path the capsule would take, the amount of fuel needed to return the ship to Earth, and so on. It is seldom observed that the success of the mission depended equally critically on the scientists' ability to predict the behavior of the astronauts manning the spacecraft. These predictions were based not on the laws of physics or neurophysiology, but on the known psychological states of the astronauts and the principles by which such states lead to behavior. Mission control knew, for example, that the astronauts wanted to get to the Moon and return safely, that they believed a number of specific actions were necessary to achieve that goal, that the astronauts would think of the necessary actions at the appropriate times, and that the actions would be performed at the right times as a result. The predictive power of psychology is astonishing when you think about it.

Skeptics like Churchland (1981) myopically focus on the unexplained and the unpredictable. Every advance in scientific understanding raises more questions than it answers. Churchland also makes much of the fact that psychology has advanced comparatively little in three thousand years, concluding that it is a "stagnant research paradigm." But the relative stagnation has some obvious explanations: the mind is enormously complex;

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scholars did not think to study psychology scientifically until around 1850, and when they did a number of false and unwarranted dogmas – principally sensationalism and behaviorism – obstructed research for the next hundred and twenty years. We will in this work patiently untangle conceptual confusions and theoretical dogmas that impede understanding of meaning and thought even today. Despite these obstacles, today’s introductory psychology and semantics texts represent a vast improvement on *De Anima* and *De Interpretatione* in any number of ways. Progress has not been as great as in physics, to be sure, but neither has there been stagnation.

What I will try to do, at some length, is to clarify the sense of thought and ideation for which the expression theory of meaning holds true. I will focus on thinking as a propositional attitude distinct from believing and desiring, and will define ideas as thoughts or parts of thoughts. This will produce a theory similar in many respects to the “language of thought hypothesis,” which, I shall argue, cannot be taken seriously on its most common interpretations. Thoughts, on my view, are structured events, a particular kind of mental representation. They are similar in many ways to sentences, but are fundamentally different, and more fundamental. Thoughts are propositions in the sense in which belief and desire are propositional attitudes. We think when thoughts occur to us. All other propositional attitudes are different relations to thoughts. Thoughts have constituent structure in a literal sense that beliefs and desires do not. Since thoughts are readily introspectible, the failure to grant thought its proper place in psychology has deprived cognitive scientists of a large and fascinating body of data as well as crucial theoretical resources.

Ideational theorists have traditionally held that the meaning of a word is an idea, and that the sense of a sentence is a thought (§21.1). This identification is untenable, and I avoid it. Meanings are properties of words, their expressing ideas or other mental states. Another powerful objection to the ideational theory is that it merely defines one semantic notion in terms either of itself or of another notion equally in need of analysis. One line of thought in this direction depends on failing to perceive the significant differences between the meanings of words and the contents of ideas (Chapter 22). Another starts reasonably from physicalism, but then insists groundlessly that the semantic cannot be defined in psychological terms unless those are first defined physically (Chapter 23). A legitimate objection is based on the observation that we have gained little by explaining what a word *means* in terms of what a word *expresses*, unless we can explain expression independent of meaning. Indeed, it is natural to suspect that “expressing the idea *man*” just means “meaning *man*.” This suspicion leads

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naturally to the conclusion that idea-talk, to the extent that it is legitimate, is just a *façon de parler* to be explained away in terms of meaning-talk, with the consequence that the ideational theory cannot possibly tell us what meaning is. The attempt of Hobbes and Locke to define “mark” was a step in the right direction, but hardly went far enough to be satisfying. The problem was not perceived, let alone addressed, by their followers. The solution, I believe, can be found by developing the work of H. P. Grice,⁵ who attacked the problem of meaning from a completely different direction.

§1.2 THE GRICEAN PROGRAM

Grice had a bold and original vision, one that has attracted scholars well beyond the bounds of philosophy. What words mean, Grice observed, is determined in some way by what speakers mean by them. What speakers mean is determined in some way by their intentions. The central subject of linguistics, it follows, is fundamentally a matter of psychology. While Grice’s initial attempt to specify how word meaning is related to speaker meaning was crude and unsuccessful, his attempt to define speaker meaning in terms of intention has found a wide following, and stimulated a large body of research.

To mean something, Grice said, is to act with the intention of producing a certain response in one’s audience by means of recognition of intention. Many thought that this analysis was basically right, and offered minor variations to handle a few tricky cases. Others observed that with slight adjustments, the Gricean condition could be used equally well to define the related notions of expressing and referring. Unfortunately, a broad and diverse body of familiar facts seems to show quite clearly that the Gricean analysis of meaning, expressing, and referring is fundamentally flawed. The principal error, I shall argue, is its emphasis on audience-directed intentions. This very feature, however, makes the Gricean condition a natural candidate for the analysis of informing, telling, and communicating. Indeed, almost as many philosophers have used the Gricean condition to define communication as have advocated it for meaning. Grice and his closest followers wrongly assumed, I shall argue, that meaning is the attempt to communicate.

I refer to expressing, referring, and communicating as *semantic acts*. They comprise a special class of illocutionary speech acts, distinguished in part by their fundamentality. “Speech act theory” has come to be

5 See Grice 1957, 1968, 1969a, 1982, 1986, 1989.

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understood as the study of asserting, ordering, questioning, requesting, promising, apologizing, begging, and other similar actions. Much attention has been devoted to their classification and definition. All entail the performance of what I am calling semantic acts. It is impossible to assert something without expressing a belief. You cannot ask someone to do something without referring to and communicating with her. By contrast, none of the higher-order illocutionary acts are entailed by the semantic acts. I can express the belief that someone is asleep without asserting that he is. I can express a desire for you to leave without ordering or asking you to leave.

I shall define communication in terms of meaning, meaning and referring in terms of expression, and expression in terms of intention (Part I). I shall thus be carrying out part of Grice's program. But the intention that I specify differs markedly from the Gricean intention. We need to distinguish clearly between Grice's general program, and the specific implementation that he proposed. In place of the intention to produce certain responses in an audience, I substitute the intention to produce an indication that one has certain mental states. Since indication is a close relative of what Grice called natural meaning or signification, my account is more Aristotelian or Lockean. I hope to make it clear that my analysis accommodates simply and naturally the whole dizzying array of facts that are problematic and must be explained away on competing theories. The Gricean analysis, for example, has trouble with the familiar fact that people often talk to babies, and mean something when they do, despite having no intention to produce a belief in them. Hand waving, bullet biting, and other desperate measures are unnecessary on my account: someone talking to a baby is still expressing thoughts and beliefs, and does intend to provide an indication that he has them. The stultification and defeatism characterizing recent work on semantic acts is a product, I submit, of an irrational fixation on the specifics of Grice's proposal.

While semantic acts are the central focus of Part I, our attention will not be confined to them. Complete understanding of the act of communicating, for example, requires comparing it to informing and telling, which are higher-order illocutionary acts. Since understanding a speaker requires grasping what he or she means, we will implicitly be shedding light on the nature of understanding. We will not, however, be investigating how we understand words, or how we produce meaningful speech, which are empirical problems for cognitive science. Our general goal is to shed light on meaning, expression, communication, and reference by showing the exact location of these concepts in our larger conceptual scheme. In the

process, we will distinguish two different kinds of communication and four different kinds of speaker meaning. Given the importance to human beings of the general activity of conveying ideas, it should not be surprising that we have a complex system of concepts specifying different but closely related ways of doing so. My goal is to delineate the structure of this system.

Toward the same end, I will also attempt to explain how word meaning is related to speaker meaning, thus tackling the other part of the Gricean program (Part II). This will involve defining what it is for a speaker to use a language, and for a language to be a living language. The theory to be advanced is simultaneously a use theory, an ideational theory, an intention-alistic theory, and a conventionalist theory. The relation between truth and meaning will be duly explained. A language, on my view, is a system for the expression of ideas and other mental states. It is a living language only if it is used conventionally by a group of speakers for the purpose of communication. What words mean in a living language is dependent on the conventions in that group governing what speakers mean by their words. The referential properties of words are those of the ideas they express. I hope to show, in short, that generative semantics and sociolinguistic pragmatics are complementary rather than competing approaches to the study of language. To round out the study, we will briefly examine meaning in artificial languages and idiolects. Meaning here is established by stipulation and individual practice, respectively, rather than by convention.

One problem that Grice did not see arises from the relativity of word meaning to languages. “Rot” means “red” in German, “decay” in English. If we say that “rot” means “red” in German because it is conventional for German speakers to use “rot” to mean “red,” do we not run in a circle? For what is it to speak German except to use words to mean what they mean in German? How can we pick out the conventions that determine what words mean in German without identifying them as the conventions to use words to mean what they mean in German? The answer will lie partly in the self-perpetuating character of conventions, in virtue of which usage today evolves from prior usage, and partly in our ability to identify new languages without knowing what words mean in those languages.

Grice and his followers attempted to define word meaning in terms of one kind of speaker meaning: meaning *that* *p* by uttering *e*, which involves the expression of belief. This led, among other things, to difficulties with linguistic units below the level of the sentence, and to the problematic doctrine that word meaning must be defined in terms of sentence meaning. I avoid these difficulties by focusing on another kind of

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speaker meaning: meaning “m” by expression e, which involves the direct expression of thoughts or ideas. In another respect, then, my neo-Gricean account is more Lockean or Aristotelian than Grice’s own. Our ability to define word meaning independent of sentence meaning will enable us to account for the compositionality and productivity of meaning. The meaning of a sentence is determined recursively by the conventions pairing word structures with idea structures, and by the basic conventions pairing the words in the sentence with ideas.

One of my main subthemes is that thought is as fundamental and important a concept of psychology as belief or desire. Accordingly, I will devote considerable attention to distinguishing thought from belief, developing the notion of ideas as thought parts (Part III). I will then rebut objections to ideational theories of meaning (Part IV). Given that our goal is to understand the nature of meaning, the “*de dicto*” attitudes will generally be more important for us than “*de re*” attitudes (see §6.2). Sentences ascribing propositional attitudes generally have transparent as well as opaque interpretations. The opaque interpretation will be our default.

While names have seemed especially problematic, they are easily accommodated by the expression theory once we abandon the widely accepted but groundless doctrine that all basic ideas are general or descriptive. Indexicals are more complicated than names, but can also be handled by the expression theory. Indexicals express a special type of thought-part that links with perceptions and other mental events, whose reference becomes the indexicals’ reference. I will develop the expression theory for these two domains in my forthcoming *Nondescriptive Meaning and Reference: Names, Indexicals, and Other Special Cases*. The other cases will include interjections, syncategorematic terms, conventional implicatures, and pejorative terms.

§1.3 SYSTEMATIZATION

This work is part of a larger project, which seeks to increase our understanding of psychology by systematizing its elements.⁶ Psychology, as I understand it, is the study of belief, desire, thought, intention, decision, reasoning, inference, fear, hope, joy, sorrow, pain, imagination, itches, tingles, sensations, and all of the other states and processes either available to introspection or closely related to those that are. Psychologists are

6 See the brief history of my *Belief, Desire, and Thought* in the Preface. Parts of the system have been published in Davis 1981a, 1981b, 1982, 1984a, 1984b, 1987, 1988a, 1988b.