

# Philosophy of Language

## Lecture 8: Meta-semantic themes

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## 0. What is meta-semantics?

Semantics, as it is generally practiced today, can appear to be a **purely descriptive** enterprise, tasked with assigning the correct meaning to each expression of a language.

But semantics does provide **explanations** – it tells us that sentences mean what they do because they have a syntactic structure and because their constituents mean what they do. This sort of explanation bottoms out at lexical meaning.

We need an account of where linguistic meaning is coming from. This is what meta-semantics is about.

# 1. The use theory

## 1. The use of words

hello	used as a greeting or to begin a telephone conversation
very	used for emphasis
here	used when pointing or gesturing to indicate a nearby place
cat	used when talking about ... cats ???

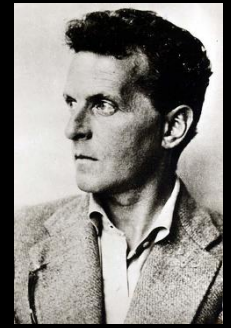
In its most **radical form** the use-theory of meaning identifies the meaning of every expression of a language with its use among speakers of the language.

The radical view is clearly false: in any interesting language there are meaningful **sentences that have never been used**.

A **sensible but bold** use-theory would identify only the meanings of words, or perhaps just a subclass of words, with their use.

# 1. The use theory

## 2. Language games



“The language is meant to serve for communication between a builder A and an assistant B. A is building with building-stones: there are blocks, pillars, slabs and beams. B has to pass the stones, and that in the order in which A needs them. For this purpose they use a language consisting of the words **block**, **pillar**, **slab**, **beam**. A calls them out;—B brings the stone which he has learnt to bring at such-and-such a call.—Conceive this as a complete primitive language.”

Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §2

The use of a word is a **regularity** within a language game. The regularity must be **robust** (had A uttered **block** B would have brought her a block) and articulated without **circularity** (when A utters **block** B brings her such-and-such a stone).

# 1. The use theory

## 3. Inferential roles

If we want a use theory to be systematic (many use-theorists don't!) we need to find some common role all lexical items play – otherwise we won't be able to plug the account of their use into a compositional theory. This common role might be that of **inference**.

Introduction rule for  $\wedge$ : from  $\varphi$  and  $\psi$  infer  $\varphi \wedge \psi$

Elimination rule for  $\wedge$ : from  $\varphi \wedge \psi$  infer  $\varphi$ ; from  $\varphi \wedge \psi$  infer  $\psi$

**Inferential role semantics:** understanding a word consists in knowing its inferential role, which in turn is nothing more than knowing how the word can be employed in deductive reasoning.

# 1. The use theory

## 4. Conceptual roles

More generous views about the roles of words in language accept sources of meaning other than inferential know-how.

**Conceptual role semantics:** understanding a word consists in knowing its conceptual role, which in turn is nothing more than knowing how to employ the word in general cognition (including, non-inferential mental processes such as categorization, association, and imagination).

The credibility of such a theory of meaning depends on how many types of roles it allows words to play. The more roles it specifies, the more credible it will be. But specifying too many roles makes it harder to combine the theory with compositional explanations.



## 2. Grice's program

### 1. Natural and non-natural meaning

Those spots mean that the patient has measles.

Those three rings mean that the bus is full.

The most striking differences between these sentences involve **factivity** and **agency**: the first entails that the patient has measles, while the second does not entail that the bus is full; the second entails that someone meant by those rings that the bus is full, while the first does not entail that someone meant by those spots that the patient has measles.

A natural thought (one that Grice nonetheless does not endorse explicitly) is that while the first is about a relation between facts, the second describes a relation between an agent and a proposition. He calls the former **natural meaning**, the latter **non-natural meaning**.

## 2. Grice's program

### 2. Analysis of speaker meaning

Grice proposed the following analysis of non-natural meaning (in the context of language use also known as **speaker meaning**) in terms of intentions:

By uttering  $x$  the utterer  $U$  meant that  $p$  iff for some audience  $A$ ,  $U$  uttered  $x$  intending

- (i) that  $A$  should believe that  $p$ ,
- (ii) that  $A$  should recognize (i), and
- (iii) that (i) should be fulfilled because (ii) is fulfilled.

There are lots of counterexamples and lots of refinements. The core idea is that speaker meaning involves an **intention to influence the hearer via the recognition of this very intention**.

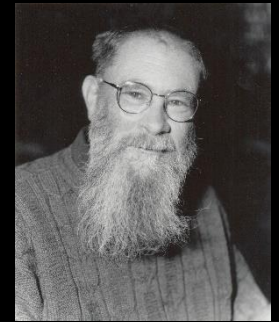


## 2. Grice's program

### 3. From speaker meaning to linguistic meaning

Grice's analysis goes in several steps:

- what it is for an unstructured utterance type (e.g. a nod) to have meaning in a person's idiolect,
- what it is for a structured complete utterance type (e.g. an utterance of the sentence **I am content**) to have meaning in a person's idiolect,
- what it is for an incomplete utterance type (e.g. an utterance of the adjective **content** within the sentence **I am content**) to have meaning in a person's idiolect,
- what it is for any of these utterance types to have meaning among a group of speakers.



### 3. Lewis's program

#### 1. Languages

What is language?

For Lewis, a **language** is just a set of expressions paired with their interpretations. Some of these expressions are sentences and the interpretation of sentences specifies truth-conditions. (This is what Chomsky calls an **E-language**.)

Sometimes (e.g. when there are infinitely many expressions) we might need to specify a language through a recursive procedure—a **grammar**. Languages can be associated with infinitely many different grammars and, according to Lewis, there is no objective ground for preferring one grammar over the others.

### 3. Lewis's program

#### 2. Conventions of truthfulness and trust

What makes it the case that a group of people speaks a particular language L?

According to Lewis, it is a **convention of truthfulness and trust in L**, sustained by shared interest in communication. Such a convention involves (i) uttering sentences in L, (ii) trying not to utter sentences in L when they are false in L, and (iii) believing that the sentences in L that are uttered are true in L.

So, is it a matter of convention that we aim at speaking truthfully and that we tend to believe each other?

No, and Lewis does not say that it is. The alternative to truthfulness and trust in L is truthfulness and trust in a different language L'. As long as we try to communicate with one another, truthfulness itself has no alternative, and is thus not a convention.

### 3. Lewis's program

#### 3. Conventions in general

What is a convention?

A regularity of behavior R among members of the population P in a recurrent situation S is a convention iff it is **common knowledge** among members of P that in any instance of S among members of P,

- (i) almost every agent conforms to R,
- (ii) almost every agent expects almost every agent to conform to R,
- (iii) almost every agent prefers to conform to R on the condition that the others do, since S is a **coordination problem** for which R is a solution.

### 3. Lewis's program

#### 3. Conventions in general

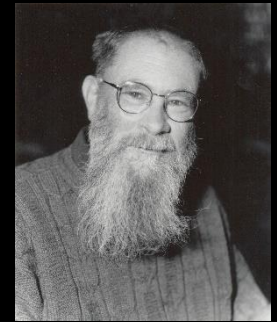
Let the coordination problem be driving on the highway. One solution is everyone driving on the right, the other is everyone driving on the left. It is common knowledge among American drivers that

- (i) almost everyone drives on the left,
- (ii) almost everyone expects almost everyone to drive on the left,
- (iii) almost everyone has a preference to drive on the left conditional on almost everyone having the same preference.

We know (iii) because when American drivers go to Britain their preference shifts.

**Complication:** they may shift because they are worried about the police. If so, driving on the right is not a convention!

## 4. Comparison



Grice and Lewis both seek to ground linguistic meaning in use. They also agree that the use must constitute a **convention**.

For Grice and Lewis alike, words are used for forming sentences. For Grice, sentences are for **meaning** something; for Lewis sentences are for **saying** something.

We use expressions in a verity of ways, but only their **communicative uses** have a role in fixing their meanings.

## 5. Is meaning in the head?

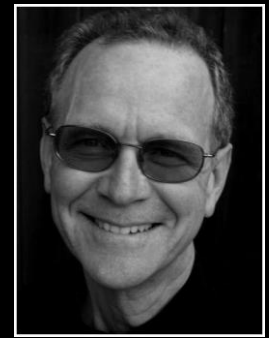
### 1. Two theses about meaning

Understanding/meaning (U/M):

If a speaker understands a sentence in a language, she knows that the sentence has a certain meaning in that language.

Meaning/truth-conditions (M/T):

A meaning of a sentence in a language determines a set of conditions under which it is true in that language.



## 5. Is meaning in the head?

### 2. The arthritis argument (following Burge)

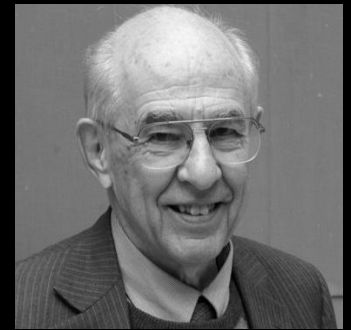
Felix is a speaker of English who has an inflammation in his thigh. He sincerely utters (A):

(A) I have arthritis.

Twin-Felix, a molecule by molecule duplicate of Felix a speaker of Twin-English, where **arthritis** refers to all instances of joint or bone ailment.

By (M/T) **arthritis** has different meanings in English and Twin-English. Felix understands (A) in English and Twin-Felix understands it in Twin-English. But then, since they are duplicates, Felix also understands (A) in Twin-English, and by (U/M) knows both that (A) has its English and Twin-English meanings. However, it may never have occurred to Felix that there are languages where the sentences he knows have different meanings.





## 5. Is meaning in the head?

### 3. The water argument (following Putnam)

Oscar is a speaker of English around 1750 who sincerely utters (W) (pointing at a glass of H<sub>2</sub>O in front of him):

(W) This is water.

Twin-Oscar, a molecule by molecule duplicate of Oscar lives on Twin Earth, a planet where instead of H<sub>2</sub>O, XYZ fills the river and lakes (but not the glass in front of him).

By (M/T) water has different meanings in English and Twin-English. Oscar understands (W) in English and Twin-Oscar understands it in Twin-English. But then, since they are duplicates, Oscar also understands (W) in Twin-English, and by (U/M) knows that (W) has both its English and Twin-English meanings. However, it may never have occurred to Oscar that there are languages where the sentences he knows have different meanings.

## 5. Is meaning in the head?

### 4. Comparison

The arthritis and water arguments have a similar structure. They both rely on the intuition—which is plausible enough—that subtle differences in the environment may affect the truth-value of a sentence without affecting a normal speaker's understanding of it.

In the first case, these differences involve the *use of a word*, while in the second they involve the *underlying nature of its referent*. In both cases, we discover a conflict between (U/M) and (M/T)—between the thesis that understanding requires knowledge of meaning and the thesis that meaning determines truth-conditions.

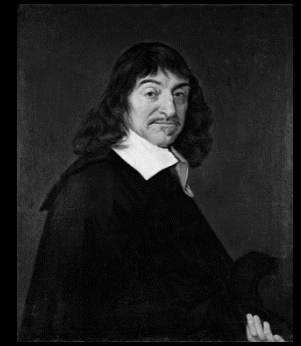
## 5. Is meaning in the head?

### 5. One answer: externalism

Externalists maintain that Felix and Oscar differ mentally from their twins (which is why they know distinct meanings for **arthritis** and **water**, respectively).

Twin Felix is in some sense familiar with arthritis, since he presumably knows people who suffer from this condition. But when he uses the word **arthritis** he talks and thinks about a different ailment—**tharthritis**.

Twin Oscar is some sense familiar with water, since it is the liquid he is looking at when he makes his utterance. But when he uses the word **water** he talks and thinks about a different liquid—**twater**.



## 5. Is meaning in the head?

### 6. Externalism and skepticism

Externalism goes against the deeply held Cartesian intuition that mentality—how one represents the world to oneself and what it is like for one to have those representations—is an **intrinsic** matter. The only way our environment can influence our mental life is by making a difference to what goes on inside.

If externalism is right, if I am **in fact** not a brain in a vat then I **couldn't be** one. If I were a brain in the vat I would not have the thoughts I actually have (although I would have thoughts that would be indistinguishable from those thoughts).

It follows that if I know that I believe that water is wet then water (and hence the external world) exists.

## 5. Is meaning in the head?

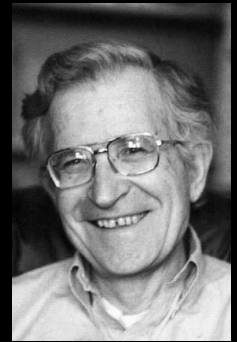
### 7. Another answer: two kinds of meaning

We need to distinguish between wide and **narrow content** for mental states as well as between wide and **narrow meaning** for words. The arguments by Burge and Putnam equivocate because **(U/M)** is about narrow meaning, while **(M/T)** is about wide meaning.

What matters for individuating mental states is narrow content: Felix and Oscar have the same mental states, and so **internalism** can be upheld.

## 5. Is meaning in the head?

### 8. Internalism and linguistics



Chomsky argues that the linguistically relevant notion of meaning is narrow.

**London** can be used to talk about a particular place near the river Thames but also about a political institution which could, in principle, be relocated. But no place could be at another place.

Why not say that London is **polysemous**?

- (1) ?? **Giants are mythical creatures and many of them are basketball players.**
- (2) **London is near the ocean but if sea levels rise it may have to move.**

## 5. Is meaning in the head?

### 9. Deference

Externalists tend to believe that linguistic competence rests, in part on **deference**.

Felix counts as understanding **I have arthritis** in part because if an English-speaking doctor were to tell him that this sentence is false, he would be inclined to concede that he was mistaken. Oscar counts as understanding **This is water** in part because if an English-speaking chemist were to tell him that this sentence is false, he would be inclined to concede that he was mistaken.

Internalists tend to be skeptical about the role of deference in understanding. Chomsky, for example, thinks we should defer to experts about the nature of arthritis and water, but not when it comes to the meaning of **arthritis** and **water**.

## 6. Summary

- The slogan that meaning is use is meaningful but useless. We have a much better grip on meaning than on use.
- There are two reasonably specific proposals how to account for linguistic meaning in terms of conventions of doing something. For Grice, this something is (speaker) meaning, for Lewis, it is saying.
- There are influential arguments showing that two widely held assumptions of semantics – the understanding/meaning link and the meaning/truth-conditions link – are in conflict.
- Externalists seek to reconcile the two assumptions; internalists argue that we should reject truth-conditional semantics.



the end (for real)

