

Meaning in the Philosophy of Language*

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Abstract—The issue of meaning has long been a core subject in the Western philosophy of language. Basically there are two canonical traditions of approaching this issue, namely the referential theories of meaning and the mental theories of meaning. The various claims and arguments concerning the issue of meaning are a vivid testimony to our ever-deepening understanding of the relation between words and the world we live in. The fruitful finding on the philosophical meaning makes tremendous contributions to relevant research domain of linguistics.

Keywords—*meaning; philosophy of language; reference; mind; mental image; mental representation*

I. INTRODUCTION

What does "meaning" mean in the Western philosophy or specifically in the philosophy of language? Before we answer this research question, let's first of all consider the following scenario. Suppose someone asks you what the word "alpaca" means, you can either find its definition in a dictionary or an encyclopedia or take this person onto the African plain and point to a particular animal and says "Look! That is an alpaca". Then what should you do when someone asks you what the word "bird" means? Well, this question might be trickier than the alpaca question, because you will find it is difficult to point to a particular animal which has all the necessary qualities to account for the definition of "bird". You will equally be puzzled if asked to draw a picture of what a "bird" is. You don't know whether to draw a parrot or a penguin or a flamingo or a canary, for they all belong to birds. In addition, if someone asks you define what a Kylin (a mythological creature known as the Chinese dragon) is, you can never point to a particular creature anywhere in the world and say "Look, that is a Kylin". But this does not mean the word "Kylin" has no meaning. All of these invite us to think about the issue regarding the nature of meaning in philosophy. As a matter of fact, the Western philosophy of language originated from the relation between words and the world. Those pioneering theories (i.e. mental image, empiricism, rationalism, reference, etc.) reveal how those ancient philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, etc. came to understand the relation between words (the basic linguistic unit) and things / facts (the basic unit of the world).

II. THE PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

The philosophy of language, as the term indicates, is mainly concerned with philosophical issues in relation to the discipline of linguistics. Major topics in this tradition include: (a) ontological issues that deal with the nature of language and of reality; (b) epistemological issues that investigate the nature and scope of the speaker's knowledge of language; (c) methodological issues that study the nature of linguistic explanation, the appropriate roles of abstraction and idealization [1].

The definition of the philosophy of language has been discussed in such key works as *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Language*, *A Companion to the Philosophy of Language* and *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Language*, etc. Those who are interested in the official definitions can turn to these works for reference. However, a brief description of this notion can be simply put as follows:

Philosophy of language explores the relationship between language and reality. In particular, philosophy of language studies issues that cannot be addressed by other fields, like linguistics, or psychology. Major topics in the philosophy of language include the nature of meaning, intentionality, reference, the constitution of sentences, concepts, learning, and thought [2].

Thus what the philosophy of language is concerned about is not language itself (the ontological or the metaphysical perspective) but how language interacts with the objective world or reality we live in. In other words, language is seen as a "medium of conceptualization" through which people come to understand the belief and representation of the world. Of those major topics within the discipline of the philosophy of language, the exploration of the nature of meaning has received the most attention. Here arises the question: what is meaning and what do we mean when we talk about meaning? This paper will attempt to approach the philosophical issue of meaning from two traditions: the referential theories of meaning and the mental theories of meaning. Both aspects attempt to explain the nature of meaning and its relation to the world we live in.

III. REFERENTIAL THEORIES OF MEANING

Reference has featured in debates about language ever since Platonism in Ancient Greek, scholasticism in Middle Age and empirical epistemology in modern Britain. However, it is generally acknowledged that pioneering studies on

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reference date back to John Stuart Mill who revived the British empirical approach to language in that the meanings of words must be explained in terms of our experience. He claimed that the meanings of words contain two aspects: denotation and connotation. The former deals with the referents individual words can pick out, while the latter copes with all the attributes individual words can contribute to. In Mill's eye, proper names adhere directly to objects; hence they only have denotative meanings but not connotative meanings. Mill was a pioneer who used the logic of language to deal with philosophical issues in modern times, but his theory of meaning has three drawbacks. Firstly, it cannot explain the meaning of an empty name, i.e. a proper name that has no referent. Secondly, it cannot deal with the meaning problem of existence such as the sentence "Santa Claus exists / does not exist". Thirdly, it cannot explain the meaning problem or the informativeness of identity statements such as "Sophoniscus is the father of Socrates". Sentences of self-identity are true solely in terms of their logical form even though we do not know what the signs refer to. These three problems later became the major topics in analytic philosophy (of language).

Gottlob Frege's theory of meaning, especially his distinction between the sense and reference of linguistic expressions was groundbreaking in semantics and philosophy of language. The reference of an expression is the actual thing or object the expression refers to, while the sense is the "mode of presentation" or cognitive value corresponding to the expression through which the reference is picked out. Thus in such sentence as "The morning star is the evening star", "the morning star" and "the evening star" have the same reference (the planet Venus) but different senses (properties of Venus). Based on Frege's theory, empty names, such as the aforementioned "Santa Claus", have only sense but not reference. In addition, the sense, as Frege put it, conveys information to us in its own distinct way, and such information may in turn help to determine the referent for the linguistic sign or expression. As Frege put it:

It can perhaps be granted that an expression has a sense if it is formed in a grammatically correct manner and stands for a proper name. But to whether there is a denotation corresponding to the connotation is hereby not decided... [3]

To put it simply, sense determines reference in that the understanding of the sense does not necessarily ensure a corresponding referent.

However, Bertrand Russell did not quite agree with Frege's distinction between reference and sense. Instead he argued that some expressions are meaningful in terms of direct reference. According to Russell, singular definite descriptions such as "the President of the US" or "the first man landing on the moon" are proper in that they can pick out corresponding referents in the real world. However, descriptions like "the teacher from some school" or "the present King of France" are improper in that there has no such entity they refer to in the real world. In addition, his well-known claim of the definite description holds that "the morning star" and "the evening star" in the previous Frege's example differ just in the way of description. As for empty

names and the problem of existence, Russell proposed the notion of propositional function that the name (description) in the theme position of a proposition can be moved to the predicate position so as to solve the delicate problem.

Following Frege and Russell, Peter Frederick Strawson included the element of speaker and context in the study of reference. He argued that reference is seen as the act the speaker performs at a particular time and place by using linguistic signs (words and utterances), shifting the study of reference from the semantic domain to the pragmatic domain. Keith Donnellan distinguished the attributive use and referential use of definite descriptions, and argued that reference is a pragmatic phenomenon that occurs in a particular context and is influenced by the speaker's intention and beliefs. Saul Kripke and Hilary Putnam both defended a causal account of reference, a theory of how terms acquire specific referents based on evidence in an even more complex social context. Kripke's notion of causal chain examines the occurrence and development of linguistic signs (including proper names and natural words) from a sociogenetic perspective. Putnam studied proper names and maintained a linguistic division of labor on the basis of which referents of proper names are fixed in specific linguistic communities.

Other theories of meaning in modern philosophy of language include, for instance, Saussure's ideational account of meaning, Wittgenstein's account of meaning in use, the verification theory of meaning in logical positivism (i.e. Rudolf Carnap's Tolerance Principle and Willard Quine's indeterminacy of translation thesis), John Austin's illocutionary force, Paul Grice's theory of intention and Noam Chomsky's account of meaning based on the Innate Hypothesis. On the other hand, Alfred Tarski and Donald Davidson are the leading and influential exponents in developing true-condition semantics to investigate the truth-condition of statements. Here we will not go into details on these theories respectively, and interested readers can do research on their own.

To briefly sum up, the above review of referential theories of meanings shows that the relation between language and the world has long been the core subject in modern and contemporary Western philosophy of language. The research on referential meaning is multi-dimensional and multi-leveled, which shows the western philosophers' gradual deepening process of understanding human being and the world. These researches also reflect different schools of philosophy of language such as debate over internalist v.s. externalist perspective of reference as well as semantic realism vs. anti-realism. These arguments actually bring issue of the referential meanings of linguistic signs into two aspects: the internal and the external approaches. The internal approach tries to investigate meaning from within our mind and the external approach tries to find answer from beyond our mind.

IV. MENTAL THEORIES OF MEANING

To explain the meanings of words with reference to human mind has long been a tradition in Western philosophy

dating back to Platonic times when it was claimed that the meanings of words do not come from the specific form but from the Ideal Form of the referents. The Ideal Form is the invariable nature of things that are only accessible to us through our mind instead of our sense organs. Though Aristotle did not quite agree with Plato's account of the meanings of words, he also held that meaning is not separable from mind in that the meanings of words come from the ideas or mental images that are developed in the process of our experience and perception of the world. In modern times, the epistemological philosophy also includes the notion of mind in the explanation of how human come to understand the world. In the analytical philosophy of language, mind is a perspective philosophers try to account for the issue of meaning. In more recent years, with the rising of psychological philosophy and cognitive science, the study of meaning approached from the psychological dimension has become one of the core subjects in the philosophy of language. In what follows, we will approach this topic from three aspects.

A. *Meaning as Mental Image*

The ideational account of meaning is to treat meanings of words as meaning of the mental image marked by that word. Its basic view is that meanings of words are not the referents they refer to but the mental images of corresponding referents. We use words to refer to the mental images in our mind that originate from our experience and perception in the outside world.

John Locke was the first philosopher in modern epistemological philosophy to investigate the meaning of language at the mental level. As an empirical philosopher, Locke opposed the pre-existing concepts, and maintained that knowledge is instead determined only by experience that derives from sense perception [4]. He believed that human's reason plays an important role in the process of knowledge acquisition. Such reason is innate and prior to experience, which includes human's basic cognitive ability, thinking ability, inferential ability and memory [5]. In his opinion, words do not directly refer to the objects in the outside world but to the ideas in our mind. The ideas are known as the mental images, and they are the result of perception of the world that leaves in our mind and of how cognitive agents perceive the world. In this way, meanings of words come from the match between the word and the ideas in our mind, and linguistic communication is seen as the transmission of ideas between speaker's mind and hearer's mind via linguistic signs. In this process, linguistic signs function only as the code model.

In addition, Locke discussed the notion of simple idea, complex idea and general idea in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Simple idea cannot be further decomposed. Complex idea is made up of simple ideas and thus can be decomposed into simple ideas. General idea is the synthesis of all the attributes of the objects we experience and perceive in the mind. Let's take the word "Tree" for instance. It is a general idea, and it does not target at a particular attribute. Instead it is the abstraction of all the attributes of the trees we perceive and experience in reality.

Therefore these three types of idea correspond with three types of words. In other words, words have three types of meaning.

On the other hand, the empirical account of meaning has its obvious drawbacks. Firstly, it fails to coordinate the generality and specificity of words. It seems impossible that the mental image marked by a word is supposed to have both the clear attributes of the category and specific attributes of a particular object. The word "bird", for instance, has no specific attributes (i.e. color, size, shape, etc.), but a particular bird has specific attributes. Secondly, not all words have their corresponding mental images. Words such as "the", "seven" and "from" have no matching mental images, and then their meanings are hard to explain [6]. Thirdly, since mental image comes from the experience cognitive agents perceive in the outside world, different agents must have different experience. Here arises the challenging question: which of these mental images constitute the meaning of words? To sum up, to match meanings with mental images can only explain a (tiny perhaps) part of meanings of linguistic signs, and such theory of meaning fails to take into account the complexity of the meanings of linguistic signs.

B. *Meaning as the Speaker's Intention*

Meaning can be approached from the perspective of the speaker's intention, and such theory of meaning is seen as a mental state. In modern philosophy of language, this trend of theory of meaning started in 1940s and 50s with the publication of Grice's *Meaning* in 1957. Grice's investigation of meaning as the speaker's intention began with his consideration about the verb "mean" in the following two sentences in English.

- (1) a. Those spots mean (meant) measles.
 - b. Those spots didn't mean anything to me, but to the doctor they meant measles.
 - c. The recent budget means that we shall have a hard year.
- (2) a. Those three rings on the bell (of the bus) mean that the bus is full.
 - b. That remark, "Smith couldn't get on without his trouble and strife", meant that Smith found his wife indispensable. [7]

Grice found out that "mean" has two usages in the above example. In (1) it indicates a natural and non-conventional relation, while in (2) it indicates a non-natural and conventional relation. He called the former "natural meaning / sense", and the latter "non-natural meaning / sense". Since natural meaning does not fall into the scope of investigation of philosophy of language (Instead it belongs to the scope of investigation of natural science), non-natural meaning is what we focus on right here.

One of the basic characteristics of non-natural meaning is that there is no inevitable connection between a linguistic sign and its meaning. Therefore, the verb "mean" indicates that it is somebody who uses this sign to convey a certain

meaning but the sign itself does not have such meaning. If we put "the fact that..." prior to some expression (e.g. the fact that those three rings on the bell of the bus means that the bus is full), the meaning of the sentence will change. This shows that such non-natural meaning is indeterminate and cancellable.

Grice also distinguished three types of non-natural meaning, i.e. type meaning, token meaning and the speaker's meaning [8]. Sometimes these three types of meaning are consistent, and sometimes the speaker's meaning is decisive to the other two types.

To sum up, Grice opened up a new area in the study of ontological meaning by attempting to account for the meaning of linguistic signs via the speaker's intention. However, this approach has many problems as Grice has noticed himself. Firstly, the matching between the speaker's mental state and the corresponding linguistic signs (words, sentences, utterances, etc.) seems an impossible mission in the complex ordinary language communication, not to mention the type of potential expressions. Potential expressions do have their meanings, but the potential speaker's intention is hard to be determinate. Secondly, when the speaker uses linguistic signs to convey his intention, he has his intention and intends the hearer to believe something. But the problem is whether the speaker, consciously or unconsciously, convey both the informative intention and communicative intention at the same time? It is hard to say. If the intention of the speaker is hard to be determinate, then how can we be sure that the meaning of linguistic signs (non-natural meaning) must come from the speaker's intention? Thirdly, Grice's theory of non-natural meaning and the speaker's intention are mutually determined, as has been pointed by Davidson [9]. Namely, the fact that a linguistic sign conveys a certain intention is because the speaker intends this sign to convey such meaning. On the contrary, the fact that a speaker has an intention is because he uses a certain linguistic sign to convey such intention. Therefore be it viewed from diachronic or synchronic perspective, linguistic signs and the speaker's intention are mutually presupposed.

C. Meaning as the Mental Representation

To treat meaning as the mental representation is another attempt to solve the puzzle of meaning in natural language. Such theory of meaning is an important part of Jerry Fodor's Language of Thought Hypothesis (LOT). In addition to LOT, Fodor also proposed the well-known Modularity of Mind Hypothesis in 1983.

Mentalese, known as the language of mind, is a system of sign between natural linguistic signs and human mind, or the connection between natural language and our mental or cognitive process. The reason to distinguish this notion is based on the following question. Since our mind (mental activities) cannot exist without language, then does our mind rely on natural language as the medium? Obviously the answer is negative. If it were the case, people speaking different languages would have different mental activities and the communication would seem impossible. Besides the

theory of meaning as the speaker's intention fails to account for the nature of meaning of words and the source of the speaker's intention. Therefore we need a different approach to the study of meaning relating to our mental activities.

Fodor's LOT claims that there is a similar structure between mentalese and natural language [10]. Firstly, like natural language, mentalese also has the smallest constituent, the mental symbol. These mental symbols can combine to form more complex mentalese symbols. Analogously mental symbols are like words in natural language, and mentalese symbols, also known as formula, are like sentences or utterances. Secondly, mentalese also follow the same principle of compositionality as natural language. In other words, the same principle of compositionality can be used again and again in the process of forming complex mentalese symbols with simple mental symbols. In this way, mental symbols can represent the complexity of the process of mental calculation. Meanwhile, as the result of the combination of simple mentalese symbols, the meanings of symbols at a higher level are equal to the sum of the meanings of symbols at a lower level as well as the mode of compositionality.

Then where do the meanings of mentalese come from? Fodor thought they come from the matching between mentalese and the mental representation in our brain. The mental representation is somewhat similar to the mental image in the empirical tradition, but it is much more abstract than the latter. Following this view, we can say that human's mental activities are somewhat like the cause-and-effect relation among mental representations. Then where do mental representations come from? Fodor thought they come from the intentional state which derives from intentionality. Intentionality is a characteristic of human mental state [11], and it is our mental tendency towards the world. Intentional state manifests as mental representation at the mental level, and forms propositional content on the basis of mental representation. In a word, mental representation is the carrier of intentional state.

Following the above claims, we can find a reasonable and logical explanation for the ontology and source of natural linguistic signs. According to LOT, the meaning of natural linguistic signs (words and sentences) comes from the matching between signs and mentalese. The process of using natural language is seen as a process in which language users employ natural linguistic signs to translate mentalese. Thus children's acquisition of the mother tongue is seen as a process in which children learn to use a natural language (mother tongue) to translate their mentalese.

To sum up, compared with the previous two theories of meaning (meaning as mental image and meaning as the speaker's intention), the theory of meaning as the mental representation, which is based on LOT, can provide a more comprehensive and systematic explanation to the study of meaning of natural language. However, such theory of meaning is not without problem. Some scholars have challenged it by asking whether the operation of human mind is, like what Fodor says, based on mental representation and accurate calculation of principles. The representative

opponent voices come, for example, from those in favor of connectionism and folk psychology.

V. CONCLUSION

In this paper we have explored one of the major subjects in the philosophy of language, namely the theories of meaning. We have discussed two canonical traditions (the referential theories of meaning and the mental theories of meaning) as well as several representative philosophers and their ideas or works. The referential theory of meaning reflects how we understand the relation between words and the reality. The mental theories of meaning probe into how meaning is closely related to the idea or ideal form we form in our mind in the perception of the world. From these introduction and discussion, it is clear that the topic of meaning is an old philosophical issue that shows how human beings get to know the world and how they understand the way of perceiving and understanding the world. Therefore it can be said without exaggeration that the human world is made up of meaning, and the topic of meaning is unavoidable if we intend to understand human beings and human world. The issue of meaning is also a new topic, with the 20th century witnessing the ever-deepening investigation of this topic in the linguistic domain such as semantics and pragmatics. Contemporarily the issue of philosophical meaning contributes tremendously to the study of natural language meaning in the domain of linguistics. So currently this old topic deserves the attention of both linguists and philosophers from relevant fields.

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