

Ways in the Semantics of English

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A question

1. One of the main problems in natural language semantics:
 - a. Lois believes that Hesperus rises in the morning (true)
 - b. Lois believes that Phosphorus rises in the morning (false)
2. Two kinds of explanation:
 - a. Fregean – appeal to *senses* of expressions
 - b. Salmonian – appeal to *guises* of the contents of expressions
3. Senses and guises are modes of presentation. So both explanations appeal to modes of presentation. Schiffer argues that all must.
4. This raises the question: what are modes of presentation? (If there are such things)
5. My answer: they are *ways*. In particular, they are *ways of thinking*.

Ways

6. We often refer to and quantify over ways:
 - a. Mary walked {this way, that way, the way John walked, one of the ways John walked, both of the ways John walked, a better way than John walked, a less awkward way than John walked}
 - b. Mary walked {thus, however John walked, awkwardly, like a duck, as if she was tired}

I think we do it much more often than this:

- c. John looks American
 - d. Macbeth saw a dagger
 - e. Lois kissed Superman, not Clark Kent
7. There has also been theoretical appeal to ways:
 - a. Frege and Salmon and others (as per above)(esp. if manners and modes are ways)
 - b. Stanley and Williamson on knowing how
 - c. Stalnaker on possible worlds (and Lewis?)
 - d. Adverbial theories of perception
 - e. Breckenridge on 'look' sentences

What are ways?

8. Very little has been said about this. The common theme is that they are properties:
 - a. Stalnaker on *ways the world might be*
 - b. Stanley and Williamson on *ways of engaging in actions*
 - c. Leeds on *ways of appearing*
 - d. Landman and Morzycki on *ways*
9. My account:
 - a. Ways are properties
 - b. For property p to be a way is for there to be some property q such that p is a way of q
 - c. For property p to be a way of property q is for p to entail q
10. So by 'way' we mean a relation between properties, and it is the entailment relation.
11. Example: being red is a way of being coloured, because being red entails being coloured; being red is not a way of being square, because it being red does not entail being square.
12. If ϕ is a kind of event (i.e. a property of events) then a way of ϕ -ing is any property that entails being a ϕ -ing. Examples: ways of swimming, ways of thinking.
13. Some apparent counterexamples that I think can be dealt with:
 - a. Eating raw chicken is a way of getting salmonella, but eating raw chicken does not entail getting salmonella
 - b. Walking with a hat on is not a way of walking, but walking with a hat on entails walking
14. A plausible alternative that I think should be rejected: ways are *determinates*.

An application: ways of thinking

15. There are such things as *ways of thinking*. They are properties of events. They are those properties of events that entail being a thinking.
16. If x is an object then there are such things as *ways of thinking about x* . They are properties of events. They are those properties of events that entail being a thinking about x .

17. When someone thinks about Venus there are many ways in which she thinks about it, of varying degrees of generality. One of these is the *maximally specific* way that she thinks about it. (Compare: ways of swimming, ways of being coloured)
18. When two people think about Venus, it may be that they think about it in distinct maximally specific ways w_1 and w_2 , but that there is some more general way w such that they both think about it in way w . (Compare: ways of swimming, ways of being coloured)

The sense of an expression which has content

19. Sometimes when a speaker uses 'Hesperus' to mean Venus she thinks about Venus during the meaning event (perhaps not always).
20. When two speakers use 'Hesperus' to mean Venus, if they do think about Venus while meaning it then it is unlikely that they think about it in the same maximally specific way.
21. But there might be a more general way in which they both think about Venus.
22. In fact, there might be a way w of a sufficiently high degree of generality that it is generically true that when people use 'Hesperus' to mean Venus they think about Venus in way w .
23. I propose that there is such a way (many, in fact), and that there is a maximally specific such way. Call this maximally specific way the *sense* of 'Hesperus'.
24. Similarly, I propose that there is a way w' of a sufficiently high degree of generality that that it is generically true that when people use 'Phosphorus' to mean Venus they think about Venus in way w' . Call the maximally specific such way the *sense* of 'Phosphorus'.
25. Moreover, I propose that 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' have distinct senses.
26. In general, if e is an expression that has content, then the sense of e is the maximally specific way w such that it is generically true that when people use e to mean c they think about c in way w (there may be no such way, in which case e does not have a sense)(and I see no reason to rule out there being more than one such way).

How senses might count as meanings

27. I have argued elsewhere that by ' e means m ' we mean that meaning events whose instrument is e are events whose content is m (a generic).
28. Since it is generically true that meaning events whose instrument is 'Hesperus' are events whose content is Venus, 'Hesperus' means Venus.

29. I now propose that by ‘ w means m ’ we might also mean that meaning events whose instrument is e are events whose way is m (a generic), where the way of a meaning event is the maximally specific way that the agent of the event thinks about the content of the event during the event.
30. Since there is a way of thinking about Venus w such that is generically true that meaning events whose instrument is ‘Hesperus’ are events whose way is w , ‘Hesperus’ means w , on this reading. This is why the sense of ‘Hesperus’ counts as a meaning of ‘Hesperus’.
31. So ‘ e means m ’ is structurally ambiguous, between a reading on which ‘ m ’ is used to specify the content of the relevant meaning events (call this the *transparent* reading), and a reading on which it is used to specify the way of these events (call this the *opaque* reading).

Compare: ‘A bomb killed Mary’

32. We might say that there are two things that ‘Hesperus’ means: it has a *transparent meaning* (its content) and an *opaque meaning* (its sense).
33. This makes it sound like ‘Hesperus’ is ambiguous. But if we are more careful we can see that it is not. The question, What does ‘Hesperus’ mean?, is structurally ambiguous. Once disambiguated it has only one of these as an answer. There is no single reading of “‘Hesperus’ means x ’ on which it is true of both things.

Compare: How many things killed Mary?

34. An illustration: “‘Phosphorus’ means Hesperus”. Because the sentence is structurally ambiguous between transparent and opaque readings, and because ‘Hesperus’ is lexically ambiguous between transparent and opaque readings, there are four readings of the sentence:
 - a. The referent of ‘Phosphorus’ is Venus (true)
 - b. The sense of ‘Phosphorus’ is Venus (false)
 - c. The referent of ‘Phosphorus’ is w (false)
 - d. The sense of ‘Phosphorus’ is w (false)
35. If a word has both a transparent meaning and an opaque meaning, we would expect to find both readings available in sentences in which it occurs. Indeed we do:
 - a. Lois kissed Superman, not Clark Kent
 - b. John drank water, not H₂O
 - c. Mary was scared of the monster outside her window, not the squirrel
 - d. Billy ate a delicious hamburger, not a fatty salty meal

Further issues

36. What about expressions that have no content (e.g. empty names)? We can generalize the above theory to ways of thinking (simpliciter). Then we can allow contentless expressions to have sense.
37. Does the sense of an expression determine its content?
38. Do we have full knowledge of the sense of an expression?

Wrap-up

39. Ways are not spooky.
40. They can be put to good use in natural language semantics (in fact, we cannot get by without them).