

PHIL 332: Philosophy of Language  
Class 11: Meaning and Propositions

1. We have been considering the questions: What does a definite description mean (i.e. what is its meaning)? What does a name mean (i.e. what is its meaning)? Now we will take a step back and consider some more general questions:
  - a. What is it for an expression to be meaningful (i.e. have a meaning)?
  - b. What is it for two expressions to be synonymous (i.e. have the same meaning)? (They need not be in the same language – translation)
  - c. What is it for an expression to be ambiguous (i.e. have more than one meaning)?
2. Note that there are two ways of asking these questions, one that is thought to commit us to there being such things as meanings, one which does not. This is questionable.
3. According to some accounts of meaning, there are such things as meanings. If so, we can give the following answers:
  - a. For expression  $e$  to mean meaning  $m$  is for  $e$  to stand in a certain relation to  $m$ .
  - b. For expression  $e$  to be meaningful (i.e. have a meaning) is for there to be a meaning  $m$  such that  $e$  means  $m$ .
  - c. For expression  $e$  to be synonymous with expression  $e'$  (i.e. have the same meaning) is for the meaning of  $e$  to be identical to the meaning of  $e'$ .
  - d. For expression  $e$  to be ambiguous (i.e. have more than one meaning) is for there to be (at least) two distinct meanings  $m$  and  $m'$  such that  $e$  means  $m$  and  $e$  means  $m'$ .
4. Other terminology for ' $e$  means  $m$ ': ' $e$  expresses  $m$ ', ' $e$  has the content  $m$ '.
5. If this is right, then we have two questions: What kinds of things are meanings? What is this certain relation?
6. According to a *Russellian* account, meanings are ordinary particulars, properties, and relations (2-place, 3-place, etc.), and complexes of such things:
  - a. The meaning of 'Ithaca' is the **particular** Ithaca.
  - b. The meaning of 'is gorgeous' is the **property** of being gorgeous.
  - c. The meaning of 'loves' is the **2-place relation** of loving.

- d. The meaning of 'loves Ithaca' is the **property** of loving Ithaca, a complex composed from the meaning of 'loves' and the meaning of 'Ithaca'.
- e. The meaning of 'Ithaca is gorgeous' is the **proposition** that Ithaca is gorgeous, a complex composed from the meaning of 'Ithaca' and the meaning of 'is gorgeous'.
7. Note the last kind of complex meaning. Meanings of this kind are sometimes called *propositions*. (Note: the nature of propositions is contentious – some think they are unstructured sets of possible worlds.)
8. There are interesting questions about particulars, properties and relations: How do they differ? Are they concrete or abstract? Are they mind-dependent or mind-independent?
9. There are also these and other interesting questions about propositions.
10. Here are some things commonly said of propositions:
  - a. They are abstract, not located in space and time. So they are not causally efficacious.
  - b. They are mind-independent, but can be *grasped* by minds.
  - c. They are the meanings of sentences.
  - d. They are the primary objects of assertion.
  - e. We refer to them using 'that' clauses.
  - f. They are the objects of beliefs, hopes, desires, fears, etc.
  - g. They are the primary bearers of truth and falsity.
  - h. They are the primary relata of entailment.
  - i. They are the primary bearers of possibility and necessity.
  - j. They are structured, having constituents.
11. What I argue (elsewhere): propositions are properties of the world; truth is instantiation; assertion is predication; entailment is specification.
12. What about the second question, the nature of the 'means' relation? We can think of Kripke as giving an answer to this. But more about this in coming weeks.
13. This account of what meanings are faces our four problems about names.