

PHIL 3710/LING 3332: Philosophy of Language
Week 4: Traditional theories of meaning

Meanings as things

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 might commit us to there being such things as meanings, one that might 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?

The Russellian approach

1. 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’.
2. 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.)
 3. 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?
 4. There are also these and other interesting questions about propositions.
 5. 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.
 6. 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.

Modes of Presentation

1. We have already seen problems for the Russellian view. Example:
 - a. Lois believes that **Superman** is strong.
 - b. Lois believes that **Clark Kent** is strong.

We get the same kind of problem for expressions other than names:

 - c. Lois believes that Superman **eats** spinach.
 - d. Lois believes that Superman **shmeats** spinach.
2. This suggests that meanings cannot simply be particulars, properties, relations, or complexes thereof (e.g. propositions).

3. According to a second general approach, which I will call the *Fregean* approach, meanings are *modes of presentations* of particulars, properties, and relations, and complexes of such modes of presentations.
 - a. The meaning of a name is a mode of presentation of a particular.
 - b. The meaning of a predicate is a mode of presentation of a property.
 - c. The meaning of a transitive verb is a mode of presentation of a 2-place relation.
 - d. The meaning of a sentence is a mode of presentation of a proposition.
4. This seems to solve the problems above: the meaning of ‘Superman’ is a mode of presentation of the guy, the meaning of ‘Clark Kent’ is a different mode of presentation of the guy. So too for ‘eat’ and ‘shmeat’.

But does it solve the problem of empty names? Can there be a mode of presentation of nothing?

5. It is typically proposed that modes of presentation can have structure, being composed of other modes of presentation. And the structure of the mode of presentation mirrors the structure of that of which it is a mode of presentation:

$MOP(\langle \text{Superman, being strong} \rangle) = \langle MOP(\text{Superman}), MOP(\text{being strong}) \rangle$.

6. This leads to lack of uniformity in the use of ‘proposition’. Which of the following should we call a proposition: $\langle \text{Superman, being strong} \rangle$, $\langle MOP(\text{Superman}), MOP(\text{being strong}) \rangle$, or $MOP(\langle \text{Superman, being strong} \rangle)$?
7. If ‘Superman’ means a mode of presentation, does that mean that when I assert ‘Superman is strong’ I am talking about a mode of presentation? That is counterintuitive. And does it mean that I am asserting a mode of presentation? If so, it seems that modes of presentation can be true or false. And does it mean that the objects of belief are modes of presentation?
8. One move the Fregean can make is to claim that what we talk about, what we assert, what we believe, etc, are those which are presented by modes of presentation.
9. An alternative is to stick with the Russellian approach to meaning, and use modes of presentation in some other way to solve the problem. Three methods:
 - a. By ‘Lois believes that Superman is strong’ we mean that Lois believes that Superman is strong via mop_1 ; by ‘Lois believes that Clark Kent is strong’ we mean that Lois believes that Clark Kent is strong via mop_2 .
 - b. By ‘Lois believes that Superman is strong’ we mean that for some mop , Lois believes that Superman is strong via mop ; by ‘Lois believes that Clark Kent is strong’ we mean that for some mop , Lois believes that Clark Kent is strong via mop . That makes it *true* that Lois believes that Clark Kent is strong, despite intuitions to the contrary.

- c. If Lois believes that Superman is strong then it follows that Lois believes that Clark Kent is strong, because Superman is Clark Kent. It is just misleading to use ‘Clark Kent’ rather than ‘Superman’, because it implies (in the Gricean sense) that Lois thinks of the guy in a certain way while entertaining the belief.
10. Big question: What are modes of presentation? What is a mode of presentation of Superman? Some options:
- a. A word (‘Superman’, ‘Clark Kent’)
 - b. A concept of Superman
 - c. A way of thinking about Superman
11. I argue that modes of presentation are *ways of thinking*, which are properties of thinking events. They vary in their degree of generality, just like ways of walking. At a high enough level of generality, perhaps we all think about Superman in the same way. And we can think in a certain way without there being anything about which we are thinking.

Frege on Sense and Reference

1. Frege distinguished two kinds of meaning that an expression might have: *sense* and *reference*, or *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*.
2. The **reference** of a sentence is a truth value. The reference of a sub-sentential expression is what it contributes to the reference (i.e. truth value) of sentences in which it occurs.
3. The reference of a singular term is that to which it refers. Frege called these *objects*. The reference of a predicate is a function from objects to truth values. Frege called these *concepts* (not to be confused with the modern use of ‘concept’).
4. There is fundamental ontological difference between objects and concepts: objects are complete (saturated), concepts are incomplete (unsaturated). This leads to a famous problem: is the reference of ‘... is gorgeous’ a concept? It seems both yes and no.
5. The **sense** of an expression is a way of thinking about its reference. (This is how Gareth Evans suggests that we understand what a sense is). The sense of a singular term is a way of thinking of the object that is its reference; the sense of a predicate is a way of thinking of the concept that is its reference; the sense of a sentence is a way of thinking of the truth value that is its reference. Frege called these *thoughts* (technical term).
6. Sense determines reference: it is not possible for two expressions to have the same sense but different reference. So it is not possible to think about two different references in the same way. (Is this a problem?)
7. But reference does not determine sense: it is possible for two expressions to have the same reference but different sense. ‘Hesperus’ and ‘Phosphorus’.

8. It is possible for an expression to have sense but no reference. (Should he say this?)
9. To properly understand an expression (or a speaker's use of it), one must think of its reference, and think of it in the right way. Which way is the right way? Whichever way is the sense of the expression (or the sense with which it was used).
10. Two sentences have different senses just in case it is possible for someone to understand both sentences at a given time and take different attitudes toward them (belief, disbelief, neither).
11. What about indexicals ('I', 'here', 'now', 'today', 'yesterday', etc.)?
 - a. Since it is not possible to think about different things in the same way, different people express different thoughts with 'I am cold'.
 - b. What if I assert 'I am cold', and then you assert 'You are cold' (referring to me) – have you expressed the same thought as I have? That depends on how I was thinking of myself when I asserted 'I am cold'. There is a way of thinking of myself such that no one else can think of me in that way. But there are ways of thinking of myself such that others can think of me in that way too.
 - c. Similar comments for 'Today is cold' and 'Yesterday was cold' (asserted the following day) – it is possible for these to express the same thought.
12. Thoughts:
 - a. They are neither 'things of the outer world' nor ideas – they belong to a third realm. Like ideas, they cannot be perceived; like things of the outer world, they are mind-independent. (Same for all senses?)
 - b. They are timelessly true. So the thought I express by 'It is cloudy' includes a time.
 - c. The apprehension of them is mind-dependent. So too their judgment and assertion.
 - d. They act by being apprehended and taken to be true.
13. The sense of an expression is a function of the senses of its parts.