

University of London
M.A. Seminar - Philosophy of Language 2000-1

Term 2: Classes 1-5

Knowledge of Language

Week 2 Language and Knowledge of Language

Competent speakers of a language L know which strings of words are grammatical sentences and know what those sentences mean.

A correct theory for a language L specifies the grammatical structure and meaning of each well-formed sentence of that language.

What relation, if any, is there between the theory and the speakers of a language?

Option (i) - They both concern the same object of knowledge: the language L

The theory will invoke certain linguistically relevant properties to describe the form and meaning of the expressions speakers actually use. What relation is there between speakers and these theoretical properties? Is there some epistemic relation between the two which must be respected by any satisfactory theory of meaning for their language? Or can speakers be blind to the properties recorded by the theory?

How do we select THE language the theory concerns itself with? There could be such a language without any speakers. What construal of language and linguistic properties makes sense of this idea?

Option (ii) - The task facing the speaker and the task facing the theorist may be

the same.

Here, the important first step is to describe the task itself. This is highly tendentious

The linguistic data:

All that physically occurs when two people converse is that they alternately make certain noises: the fact that they are exchanging thoughts, asking questions, giving information, raising objections, etc. must have to do, the philosopher concludes, with what takes place in their minds, where a connection has been established between the noises that they emit and the ideas that they express and convey. What makes the difference, he thinks, is that each interprets the utterances of the other; and so he is driven to concentrate upon the inner process of interpretation. (Dummett, 1991 p.14, but note this is not Dummett's own view.)

Progress in the philosophy of language and linguistics may now be seen as a branch of philosophy of mind or psychology. Is this the right option? (There is no room for philosophy of language over and above a complete philosophy of mind.)

Conflicting Intuitions

Publicity Constraint - Different Construals

Quine's methodological restriction:

In psychology one may or may not be a behaviourist, but in linguistics one has no choice. Each of us learns his language by observing other people's verbal behaviour and having his own faltering verbal behaviour observed and reinforced or corrected by others. We depend strictly on overt

behaviour in observable situations. ('Indeterminacy Again' p.5 in J.Phil 1987)

McDowell's a-theoretical construal of publicity:

For McDowell, all there is to the meaning of an expression must lie open to view on the surface of our practice. Both learners and theorists must discover meanings there. Failing this:

...the significance of others' utterances is a subject for guesswork or speculation as to how things are in a private sphere concealed behind their behaviour. (McDowell, 1981 p.225)

Should the theory presuppose the facts it aims to describe?

Modesty vs Full-bloodedness.

The theory of meaning must describe the significance speakers attach to their words and sentences, but it must do so without presupposing the meanings of those expressions. The meaning-relevant aspects of linguistic use must be first characterised without appeal to command of the language in question. This is Dummett's full-bloodedness requirement:

...the object is to specify the meanings of expressions of the language without using the notion of meaning, but rather, by laying down those properties of expressions in virtue of which they have the meanings they are to bear. (Dummett 1983, p.108)

For Dummett, the meaning of an expression is what a person knows when she understands it (or the language to which it belongs). Meaning is fully exhibited in and determined by use. So what someone understands or knows an expression to mean is fully displayed in her linguistic practice, or use. The theory of meaning for that person's language provides an extensive description of her linguistic

practice. So a correct theory of meaning will record *what* the speaker knows, the meanings she actually attaches to her expressions.

But how should the theory describe an uninterpreted piece of behaviour? How can a meaning-free description of linguistic use bring the facts about meaning to light? It is doubtful whether we can describe a linguistic practice without prejudice to its content and still be constrained to assign just the right meanings to a person's words. The task is to discover what meanings the speakers attach or assign to these bits of linguistic behaviour.