

TWO CONCEPTIONS OF LANGUAGE

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1. *Different conceptions of language*

If we view from afar the various philosophical attempts throughout the ages to achieve a satisfactory conception of the nature of language, it is evident that the one that has dominated reflection is the psychological representationalist theory. According to this familiar conception, the meaning of a word is the idea or mental representation it stands for. A judgement was held to be a combination of ideas – in the simplest case, the idea of a subject of predication and the idea predicated of it. Words are essentially names of ideas. A simple declarative sentence is a combination of words. The propositional link, which was also conceived to carry assertoric force, is the copula. The declarative sentence is the vehicle for a judgement. The content of a judgement is a representation. The role of the expression of a judgement by the assertion of a sentence is to communicate the content of judgement from speaker to hearer. Understanding what has been asserted consists in the associative generation of the same ideas in the same combination in the mind of the hearer. This conception had its ancient precursor in Aristotelian thought. Among its great advocates, in the early modern era, are Hobbes, Arnauld and Locke. In one form or another, this conception dominated philosophical reflection on language from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century. Objections to the classical idealist conception are legion and familiar. It will not be discussed further here.

A paradigm shift resulted from the rise of modern function-theoretic logic in the hands of Frege and Russell, and from the attempts to explore its philosophical implications by the young Wittgenstein. This conception became hugely influential in the USA, Carnap and the European emigrées from the Vienna Circle being the main conduit from the Old World to the New. according to this conception, the fundamental notions by which to put in order our ideas of a language are those of representation and of truth. I shall characterize this approach as the *calculus conception* of language. Its post-*Tractatus* advocates, inspired by the achievements of formal logicians in inventing the

predicate calculus and its related variants, argued that all languages, in their depth grammar, are, or can be represented as being, meaning calculi. Such a conception is to be found not only among philosophers of language, but also among linguists, for example those of Chomsky's school, as well as among psycholinguists, such as Levelt and Coltheart.

If the young Wittgenstein gave impetus to the development of the calculus conception of language, the later Wittgenstein, like Captain Nolan in the charge of the Light Brigade, tried vainly to rectify the misdirection. For he had come to think that the conception he had advocated was mistaken. Language is an anthropological phenomenon.¹ It is an extension of human behaviour. Speaking a language, according to the later Wittgenstein, is a normative practice. To master a language is to learn techniques of applying words, above all in communicative human behaviour. To learn a language, he argued, is to learn to play language games. It is *not* to learn a meaning calculus. It is not the acquisition of non-conscious computational skills. It is to learn how to participate in the language-games characteristic of the culture or form of life into which one is born. A language is an ethnological phenomenon. This conception is *not* (and was never meant to be) epitomized by the dictum that the meaning of a word is its use. Nor is it a 'use-theory of meaning'. I shall refer to it as the anthropological or ethnological conception of language.

In the late sixties a further contender arose, namely communication-intention theory, as perhaps suggested by Austin in Oxford, and certainly advanced by his pupil Searle in the USA, on the one hand, and by Grice, on the other. It was supported briefly by Strawson in his 1969 Inaugural Address 'Meaning and Truth', where he claimed it to be the primary contender against formal semanticist conceptions. It is now evident that, like behaviourist conceptions of language that were popular in the inter-war years, it is but a minor force on the battlefield of ideas. But like behaviourism, it drew attention to important features of language.

¹ Wittgenstein wrote of himself as using 'the ethnological approach' (CV, under 2. 7. 1940; MS 162b, 67v). Later sociologists would no doubt have described it as 'ethno-methodological'. For elaboration, see P. M. S. Hacker, 'Wittgenstein's anthropological and ethnological approach', in Jesús Padilla Gálvez ed., *Philosophical Anthropology – Wittgenstein's Perspective* (Ontos Verlag, Heusenstamm, 2010), pp. 15-31. The term 'anthropological approach' perhaps has some warrant by reference to *Investigations* §415 and RFM 399 ('Mathematics, after all, is an anthropological phenomenon'). Neither term is altogether felicitous.

What I should like to do in this paper is to compare the main commitments of the calculus conception of language, on the one hand, and of the anthropological conception of language, on the other. I shall try to bring into the open their very different priorities and presuppositions.

2. *The calculus conception of language – an overview*

Painting on a large canvas with a broad brush, one can say that in the calculus conception of language the pivotal explanatory notion is truth; the primary unit for analysis is the assertoric sentence; the fundamental function of sentences is conceived to be to describe how things are; and the essence of communication is telementation. By the second half of the twentieth century, the meaning of a sentence was argued to be explained by spelling out its truth-conditions on the model of Tarskian T-sentences. The meaning of a word was held to be explained by specifying its contribution to the determination of the truth-conditions of any sentence in which it occurs. The meaning of a sentence was held to be composed of the meanings of its parts (Frege's *Gedankenbausteine* conception), or to be a function of the meaning of its parts. A theory of meaning for a natural language was a latecomer on the stage. It was held to be a deductive theory that, from an array of meaning axioms and syntactical formation-rules, would be able to deliver the meaning of any well-formed sentence of a language in the form of a T-sentence. This envisaged theory was sometimes supposed to be a theoretical representation of our practical linguistic abilities (Dummett), although it is far from obvious whether that description is intelligible. It was also commonly held to illuminate the nature of linguistic understanding. In so far as communication was conceived of as telementation, it was commonly held that understanding must involve a non-conscious mental or neural process of calculating the meaning of any utterance-sentence one hears from one's knowledge of the meanings of its constituent words and their mode of combination (Dummett, Chomsky).² So all understanding of

² 'A process of derivation of some kind is involved in the understanding of a sentence', M. A. E. Dummett 'What is a Theory of Meaning?', in *Mind and Language* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1975), p. 112. '... the computations involved may be fairly intricate ... But since they rely on principles of universal grammar that are part of the fixed structure of the mind/brain, it is fair to suppose that they take place virtually instantaneously and of course with no conscious awareness and beyond the level of possible introspection', N. Chomsky, *Language and the Problems of Knowledge* (MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1988), pp. 90f.

the utterances of others is interpretation (Davidson).

One of the apparent merits of the calculus conception of language was held to be that it solved what was declared to be the fundamental problem of theoretical linguistics and philosophy of language, namely: our ability to understand sentences we have never heard before, or our ability to understand a potential infinity of sentences. This was widely held to be explicable only on the assumption that hearers possess tacit knowledge of a generative compositional theory of meaning for their language, which knowledge is put to use in the interpretative (computational) process of understanding the utterances *of others*. What is involved in understanding what *we ourselves* say with understanding was, suspiciously, left in darkness (we know what we mean by our words, and we speak with thought, without calculating the meaning of what we are about to say from anything).

It is striking that this conception of language, of what it is for a word or sentence to have a meaning, of what meaning something by a word or utterance amounts to, of what an explanation of meaning consists in, of what constitutes understanding what someone has said, was not the result of examining the use of the familiar words and phrases: ‘meaning’, ‘word’, ‘sentence’, ‘meaning of word’, ‘meaning something by a word’, ‘the meaning of a sentence’, ‘meaning something by the utterance of a sentence’, ‘explaining the meaning of a word’, ‘what is said by the use of a sentence’, ‘explaining what was said’, and ‘understanding what was said’. In fact, the calculus conception of language evolved in almost complete disregard of how these expressions are used. It was originally motivated by the exigencies of mathematical logic, by the assumption that the function-theoretic logical calculus invented by Frege is a logically ideal language, or that the somewhat different function-theoretic logic of *Principia* is the syntax for an ideal language, or that logic, represented by the new logical calculi, is the transcendental condition for the possibility of symbolic representation and hence provides the structural forms of the depth-grammar of any possible language (the *Tractatus*).

It was because of such assumptions, their theoretic commitments and ramifying consequences, that the early calculus theorists of language were willing to countenance utterly bizarre claims, which

outside their theoretical contexts would rightly have been dismissed as ridiculous. So, for example, Frege averred that the concept of a horse is not a concept; that a statement ostensibly about whales is actually about the concept of a whale; and that sentences are names of one of two objects, the True or the False. Russell was willing to assert that the only *real* names are the indexicals ‘this’ and ‘that’; that believing that Jack loves Jill is a multiple relation between the believer, Jack, Jill, the relation of loving, the form aRb , and the ‘direction’ of the relation; and that it would be absolutely fatal if people meant the same things by their words, for it would make all intercourse impossible. The young Wittgenstein held that one cannot say that red is a colour or a table an object; he claimed that the meaning of a name is the object it stands for; and he declared that we do not know whether the sun will rise tomorrow. One could cite similar absurdities in the writings of the successors of these three great philosophers, who were familiar with ever more sophisticated forms of logical calculi, such as Davidson and Dummett. What is important to remember is, first, that these are not *stupid* absurdities, and secondly, that these *are* absurdities.

3. *The calculus conceptions of language: the principles*

I should like to stand back from the numerous competing factions within the camp of calculus theorists of language, and to draw attention to just how questionable some of their shared commitments and principles are. In giving primacy to truth in their account of meaning, calculus-theorists thereby give primacy (i) to representation rather than to communication and linguistic intercourse in their account of language, and (ii) to description in their account of the function of the sentence in use. Why the primacy of truth? Not because of meticulous observation of how, in an appropriate context of misunderstanding or unclarity, speakers of a language actually explain what words mean or of how they explain the meaning of sentences (no matter whether de-contextualized type-sentences or utterance-sentences). The motivation derives from logical calculi that are concerned with elaborating the principles of truth-preserving forms of deductive inference. In particular, the motivation lies with the function-theoretic calculi of Fregean and post-Fregean logic, which represent sentences as decomposing into function- and argument-expressions, concepts as functions mapping

objects or lower level functions as arguments onto a truth value as a value, and logical connectives as truth-functions mapping truth-values as arguments onto a truth-value. The predicate calculus, with further sophisticated elaborations, became the *form of representation* for the description of natural languages and for reflections on linguistic meaning. Characteristically, features of the form of representation were projected onto what was represented. If natural language does not accord with the forms of the calculus of logic in its surface grammar, then it must do so in its depth grammar.

The pivot upon which the consequent theoretical structures turned was the notion of the truth-conditions of a sentence. The meaning of a sentence was held to be explained by specifying the conditions under which it is true. For to understand a sentence with a sense was held to consist in knowing what is the case if it is true.³ The initial model for this construal of sentential meaning and correlative understanding was the truth-functional analysis of molecular sentences. The later model was the Tarskian T-sentence.⁴ I should like to draw attention to some widely neglected features of this programme of philosophico-semantic analysis.

I shall begin with some qualms about the concept of a truth-condition, about the conception of meaning and of what counts as an explanation of meaning. First, there is an important and little noticed equivocation in the use of the term ‘truth-condition’. A truth-condition of a molecular sentence such as ‘ $\sim p$ ’, ‘ $p \ \& \ q$ ’, ‘ $p \vee q$ ’ or ‘ $p \supset q$ ’ is a condition *on the sentence*. For the molecular

³ Of course, we must distinguish between a sentence, the meaning of a sentence, the utterance of a sentence on an occasion and the statement made by the utterance of a sentence. Strictly speaking, it is not declarative sentences or their meanings that can be true or false, but rather what is said by their use. For the most part, I shall disregard these nice distinctions for the sake of brevity.

⁴ It is noteworthy that neither of the founding fathers of the calculus conception of language actually claimed that the meaning of an elementary (atomic) sentence is given by its truth-conditions. The only mention of truth-conditions in the whole of the Fregean corpus is §32 of *The Basic Laws of Arithmetic*, vol. I. That is concerned exclusively with the truth conditions of sentences formed from Frege’s eight primitive function-names that take names of truth-values as argument expressions. Here the sense of elementary sentences (which are conceived to be names of truth-values) is taken as given. In so far as Frege has any account of the sense of elementary sentences, it is that their sense is the mode of presentation of a truth-value as the value of a function for an argument. Similarly, the *Tractatus* claim that the sense of a sentence is given by its truth-conditions is tailored for the molecular sentence, and applies to an elementary sentence only in the Pickwickian sense that every elementary sentence is a truth-function of itself (‘ p ’ = ‘ $p.p$ ’)

sentence ‘ $p \ \& \ q$ ’ to be true, *it* has to satisfy the condition that both *its* constituent sentences be true; for a disjunctive molecular sentence to be true, one of the disjuncts must be true; and so on. But to stipulate that the Tarskian T-sentence “‘ p ’ is true iff p ’ specifies the truth-conditions of an elementary sentence ‘ p ’ is to abandon the very idea of *a condition a sentence has to fulfil*. Instead, what is stipulated as a truth-condition of an elementary sentence is what must be the case in reality if the sentence is to be true.

All right, we may think, then we must simply abandon the older way of talking, and follow the path Tarski pioneered and Carnap, Davidson and others adapted. We shall simply accept the idea that the meaning of a sentence is given by specifying how things must be if it is true. — But it is not that straightforward. If a sentence ‘ p ’ is to be said to be true, then things must indeed be as it describes them as being. But “‘ p ’ is true iff p ’ does not explain what ‘ p ’ means, but only *reiterates* how it describes things as being. In particular, it does not explain to someone who does not understand it, what the sentence means. It presupposes its meaning as given, and explains (trivially) only what it is for it to be true. A child, who does not know what ‘purple’ means, will not understand the sentence ‘The curtains are purple’, and his understanding will not be furthered by being told that the sentence ‘The curtains are purple’ is true if and only if the curtains are purple, as opposed to being given the explanation ‘*This* \square is purple, and the curtains are this \square colour’.

Whereas one might *count* the explanation of ‘ $p \ \& \ q$ ’ in terms of its truth-conditions as an explanation, what it explains is this particular use of the conjunction in logical formulae. It explains the meaning of the molecular sentence while presupposing the meanings of the constituent sentences as given. The Tarskian form of explanation “‘ p ’ is true iff p ’ is not what anyone other than a truth-conditional theorist of meaning would *count as* an explanation of the meaning of a sentence. It is not what is called ‘an explanation of meaning’, for an explanation of meaning eliminates or is meant to eliminate some misunderstanding or lack of understanding. If someone does not understand the sentence ‘Snow is white’, his incomprehension will not be eliminated by reiteration, any more than Englishmen can make themselves better understood abroad by loudly repeating what they said.

It will not avail to modify the Tarskian formula to read “‘*p*’ means that *p*’. For neither the sentence ‘It is raining’ nor the sentence ‘Es regnet’ mean that it is raining. What may mean that it is raining is the drumming of water-drops on the window pane. The sentence ‘Our country is now at war’ does *not* mean that our country is now at war. For if it did, then were I to say falsely ‘Our country is now at war’, that would actually mean that Britain is at war – which is absurd.

When concerned with semantic meaning, we can say that one sentence or utterance does or does not *mean the same as* another. We can explain what a misunderstood sentence means in terms of another sentence that means the same and *is* understood. So, the sentence ‘It is raining’ *means the same as* ‘Rain is falling, or as ‘Water drops are falling from the clouds’; or as ‘Es regnet’. But neither the sentence nor its utterance mean that it is raining. That is a non-trivial misuse of the word ‘meaning’ in its semantic sense.

All right, one may say. But that is just a peculiarity of English idiom. Why should we not introduce a special philosophical sense of ‘meaning’? – Of course, truth-conditional theorists may do so. But then they had better explain what they mean by the phrase ‘the meaning of a sentence (of an utterance)’. *That they have not done!* They had better explain how ‘meaning’ in the special new sense is related to ‘meaning’ in the familiar old sense; how it is related to explanation of meaning; how it is related to understanding and to criteria of understanding. For to be sure, no one is held to satisfy the criteria for understanding a sentence or utterance by mere disquotation. Special philosophical senses are usually special philosophical muddles, that have to be exposed.

We can explain what a sentence means by a synonymous sentence. But very often quite different methods of explanation of meaning are needed. If someone does not understand what the sentence ‘Sexual selection is the mainspring of the evolution of species’ means, *no one* would think that it is explained by saying “‘Sexual selection is the mainspring of the evolution of species’ is true if and only if sexual selection is the mainspring of the evolution of species’. Or again, if someone fails to understand sentences such as ‘Ultramarine is my favourite colour’ or ‘This long-case clock is six cubits high’, his failure to understand it will not be alleviated by disquotation or metalinguistic descent. *Outside formal semantics, this is not what counts as an explanation of meaning.*

So much for the use and abuse of the concept of meaning and explanation of meaning. I now turn to a quite different, but now almost forgotten difficulty. The primacy of truth and truth-conditions in the account of sentence-meaning commits the calculus theorist to some form or other of a sense/force distinction. For interrogative and imperative sentences must be shown ‘on analysis’ to decompose into a descriptive component, that can be said to have a truth-value, and a force-indicative component that shows what is being done with the true or false description. For it is a cardinal commitment of the calculus conception that the meanings of words consist in their contribution to the determination of the truth-conditions of any sentence in which they may occur. So either imperative and interrogative sentences are meaningless – which is absurd, or, on analysis, they have truth-conditions. And either words as they occur in imperative and interrogative sentences are meaningless – which is absurd, or their meanings consist in their contribution to the truth-conditions of imperative and interrogative sentences. So what must be shown is that despite appearances, imperative sentences and sentence-questions, on analysis, have truth-values. This is a *sine qua non* for a truth-conditional account of linguistic meaning.

There were various tentative attempts, by Russell, Stenius, Hare, Grice, Dummett, Davidson, and others to elaborate and vindicate this proposal.⁵ The most persuasive form it took was that every sentence contains a truth-value bearing component with a sense, represented by the form ‘that things are so’ – sometimes called a ‘sentence-radical’, and a force-indicative component represented by such forms as ‘It is the case’, ‘Is it the case’, and ‘Make it the case’. So, for example:

<i>Analysandum</i>		<i>Force-indicator</i>	<i>True or false sentence-radical</i>
The door is shut	=	It is the case (⊢) that the door is shut
Is the door shut?	=	Is it the case (?) that the door is shut
Shut the door!	=	Make it the case (!) that the door is shut

⁵ For the history of attempts to deliver such analyses, see G. P. Baker and P. M. S Hacker, *Language, Sense and Nonsense* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1984), chap. 2

This was held to show that not only are declarative sentences true or false, but sentence-questions and imperatival utterances are too. Indeed, although no one seems to have noted it, every felicitous order (request, plea, or entreaty) has to be false, and every order (request, plea or entreaty) has to be known or believed by the speaker to be false at the time of utterance. For one cannot felicitously order someone to shut a shut door or to open an open one. These forms of analysis were conceived to leave the calculus theorist free to proceed with an account of lexical meaning in terms of contribution to determination of the truth-conditions of any sentence in which the lexical item occurs.

To the unblinkered eye, this is no discovery, but *at best* an infelicitous form of representation. It is, to be sure, absurd to think that twentieth-century philosophers of language *discovered*, for the first time in human history, that orders or questions are true or false. They did not even *discover* that imperative and interrogative sentence can be paraphrased into a force-indicator and a truth-value bearing nominalized sentence. Rather, they *proposed* this as a means of saving their preferred account of meaning in terms of truth and truth-conditions, which is tailored to the exigencies of the logical calculus.

There are two complementary ways of criticising this sense/force theory. The first is tactical, the second strategic. Tactical criticisms will show, case by case, a wide range of sentential forms the meaning of which would be distorted by the envisaged paraphrases. For example: how are we to understand the following utterances

‘Could you pass the salt, please?’ = ? ‘Is it the case // that you could pass the salt’

‘I promise to meet you tomorrow’ = ? ‘It is the case // that I promise to meet you’

‘God help me!’ = ? ‘Make it the case // that God helps me’

‘Somebody open this door!’ = ? ‘Make it the case // that somebody opens this door’

‘Let’s go!’ = ? ‘Make it the case // that we go’

Not to mention ‘To be or not to be – that is the question’! Examples can be multiplied by the hundred (see *Language, Sense, and Nonsense*, chap. 2-3). Moreover, it should be obvious that although the discourse forms of declarative, interrogative and imperative sentences are *indicators* of discourse function, they are defeasible ones. A rhetorical question is an assertion (‘Is the king dead, is

the throne vacant?'), questions can be used to request or order ('Can you shut the door?'), many declarative sentences can be used to order or command ('I expect you to be there', 'You will be there', 'I should like you to be there'), and so on. To translate these mechanically into their so called depth-grammatical forms of force-indicator and sentence-radical, far from displaying them in their true lights, distorts them. This form of criticism, involving death by a thousand cuts, shows that the method of projection employed by the calculus theorist in giving the alleged depth-analysis of sentences distorts the sentences of natural language, their meaning and their uses in countless ways.

The second form of criticism is strategic. We might accept, at any rate for the sake of argument, the possibility of such paraphrases. Perhaps we could envisage such a language – although, to be sure, it is not ours. But the moot question is: does this show anything at all about the forms and structures of our languages? After all, as Wittgenstein pointed out (PI §22), we could replace every declarative sentence by a corresponding interrogative sentence coupled to an affirmation. So 'It is raining' would be represented by 'Is it raining? Yes.' *Would this show that every sentence, on analysis, contains a question?* Even if one can paraphrase every sentence in any natural language into a force-operator and sentence-radical, that shows nothing beyond itself. Above all, it does not show that the meanings of words consist in their 'semantic value', i.e. their contribution to the truth-conditions of any sentence in which they occur.

Moreover, since the sentence-radical (or 'descriptive content') has to have truth value, and since the truth-value of the sentence-radical of a command has to be false on the occasion of the giving of a felicitous command, it is incoherent to suppose that a command has to be understood as the command to make the sentence-radical true – for then *it would be a different sentence-radical!* For the sentence-radical has to be timelessly true or false.

Finally, the nominal that-clause (the 'sentence-radical'), which is supposed to express the sense, or descriptive content) of a sentence (declarative, interrogative or imperative), cannot do so. For only a sentence can have the sense of a sentence. But if we abandon the nominal clause 'that *p*' in favour of the sentence '*p*', and write 'It is the case – *p*', it is obvious that the operator 'It is the case' is

redundant. Furthermore, to write 'Make it the case – p ' and 'Is it the case – p ?' are gibberish. In short, the demands made on the concept of a declarative sentence, are incoherent. For it is essential to the concept of a declarative sentence that it *can* be used to make an assertion, but *need not* be so used.

A cardinal principle of calculus theorists concerns the relationship between word-meaning and sentence-meaning. For priority is assigned to sentence-meaning, and word-meaning is explained in terms of the contribution of a word to the meaning, i.e. truth-conditions, of any sentence in which it may occur. So, it is argued: *a word has a meaning only in the context of a sentence*. This principle was advanced by Frege in *The Foundations of Arithmetic* for broadly function-theoretic reasons pertaining to the possibility of alternative forms of function-theoretic sentential decomposition. It was endorsed by the *Tractatus* for quite different picture-theoretic reasons. The principle is plainly wrong.

Obviously, the original reasons for it are misconceived. A sentence is not composed of function-expression and argument-expression – rather sentences of Frege's concept-script are so composed. So too, a sentence is not a representing fact, and words do not represent objects in virtue of being constituents of a representing fact. One-word sentences such as 'Help!', 'Fire!', 'Snow', are perfectly decent and they cannot be decomposed into an argument-expression and a function-name.⁶ Even if such one-word utterances can be represented as elliptical (e.g. for 'Help me!', 'Fire has broken out', 'There is snow on the ground'), that is only by reference to conventions of sentence-formation in our language. One can readily imagine a language that consists only of such utterances.⁷ Equally, we commonly use words outside any sentential context, for example, in greetings ('Hello'), in exclamations ('Hurrah') and as expletives ('Damn'), on labels, in lists (e.g. of words beginning with 'z'), in crossword puzzles, in word-games, and so forth. One cannot say that names on a shopping list are meaningless, or that the words in the game of Scrabble have no meaning. Furthermore, it is

⁶ The thought that a sentence must be complex, must have multiple constituents, goes back to Plato's *Sophist*, 262a-c. For criticism of the context principle, see H.-J. Glock, 'All kinds of nonsense', in E. Ammanneller and E. Fischer eds. *Wittgenstein at Work* (Routledge, London, 2004), pp. 221-45, and G. P. Baker and P. M. S. Hacker, 'Contextual dicta and contextual principles' in *Wittgenstein: Understanding and Meaning*, 2nd, extensively revised ed. (Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford, 2009), Part I – *Essays*, pp. 159-88.

⁷ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §§19-20.

obvious that there are many occasions on which we ask for the meaning of a word *outside* any sentential context.

The truth of the matter is different. A word is *a part of speech*. The sentence, *by and large*, is the minimal unit for the performance of a speech act, although it is clear that one *can* perform speech acts with single words that are obviously *not* one-word sentences ('Hurrah', 'Hello'). It is perfectly true that what is said by the use of a sentence, no matter whether declarative, interrogative or imperative, depends on what the constituent words mean (and on the context of utterance). It does *not* follow that the meaning of a word consists in its contribution to *the truth-conditions* of any sentence in which it occurs. *That* is a theory-laden doctrine, which altogether disregards

- (i) what *we call* 'an explanation of meaning'
- (ii) what it is for an *explanans* to clarify or elucidate the meaning of an *explanandum*
- (iii) when an explanation of meaning is called for and why
- (iv) what the criteria of satisfactoriness of explanations of meaning actually are

Rather, the theory models its conception of explanation of word-meaning on the role of definitions in an axiomatic calculus.

It should be evident why the moderns, no less than the ancients, craved for sharp definitions. Plato's demand for clear cut analytic definitions was motivated by the quest for the disclosure of the real, language-independent essences of things (especially moral values), and was modelled on the Greek paradigm of knowledge, namely: achievements of geometry. The moderns were motivated by the apparent exigencies of mathematical logic. Frege's demand for determinacy of sense, as he himself said, was another form of the requirement that must be met for the possibility of logic – namely conformity with the law of excluded middle. Like Plato, Frege could hold that the real meanings of words (for example number words) might be hidden from the eyes of mankind for centuries, even though we use them everyday (FA p. vii). And he could also claim that words like 'Christian', not being sharply defined, do not express a concept at all (BLA ii, §56). This is, to be sure, absurd – by reference to *our concepts* of meaning and concept. For the idea that a word in use should

be meaningful, even though no one knows what it means makes no sense. The idea that there are rules for the correct use of words that need to be *discovered*, makes no sense. And the idea that vague words, let alone words that *might* be vague in hitherto undreamt of circumstances, are not really concept-words, makes no sense. The requirement for sharpness of definition is far removed from our practices of explanation of word-meaning and completely at odds with our communicative needs .

Finally, let me turn to the conception of communication and understanding associated with calculus conceptions of language. Investigation of communication was relegated to the sideshow of pragmatics. A full account of semantics prepares the way for pragmatics, but everything interesting about word-, sentence-, and utterance-meaning can allegedly be said independently of investigations into communication, as long as the sense/force distinction is in place. Broadly speaking, the conception of communication is telemental. All understanding of the utterances of others is interpretation. The process of understanding the utterance of another is held to be computational. Understanding is conceived to be a mental state (rather than an ability). Meaning must be assigned to the sounds or words heard, and the meaning of the sentence uttered must be derived from the meanings of the words and from the deep structure of the sentence on analysis. We are held to have ‘tacit knowledge’ (Dummett) or to ‘cognize’ (Chomsky) the depth-grammatical forms required by the theory of meaning for a language, and similar non-conscious knowledge of the transformation rules that allegedly generate the surface structures of sentences from their depth structures.

So much for some of the salient commitments and principles, and consequent problems, of calculus conceptions of language and linguistic meaning.

4. *The anthropological approach*

The anthropological approach to the clarification of the field of semantic concepts does not give priority to the notions of truth, truth-condition, representation, and force, but rather to those of use, language-game, understanding, and communication. The endeavour is not to *construct a theory* of anything, but rather to *describe* accurately the existing web of words that are in play in our discourse

about language, linguistic meaning, and understanding. This is of capital importance. The enterprise is, in Strawson's terminology, one of *connective analysis*.

We need to remind ourselves why we are engaged in these intellectual struggles.

Contemporary calculus theorists aver that they are trying to construct a theory which will explain how we can understand sentences we have never heard before, or how, with the finite resources of a language we can understand an infinity of sentences. Of course, this was not why Frege, Russell, the early Wittgenstein, Tarski or Carnap were engaged in their philosophical investigations into language and the calculi of logic. What is true is that the early Wittgenstein raised the question, and also gave the now familiar answer to the problem of the productivity of language and thereby intimated the form of the now received answer to the problem of understanding new sentences (TLP 4.02-4.03).⁸ The question moved to stage-centre as a result of Chomsky's writings, and became a central plank in philosophy of language only in the 1960s and 1970s. What is also true is that the problem is never mentioned in the post-1929 writings of Wittgenstein. My hunch is that he thought it a bogus problem, which he had misguidedly raised in the *Tractatus*. What is certain is that no one other than *later* calculus theorists held this apparent problem to be the drive shaft of philosophical enquiries into the nature of language.

So what are the problems? They are problems that unavoidably arise when we reflect on language and its nature, on our capacity to master a language, on our speech activities, on the relations between thought and language and between language and reality. They arise because of unclarity surrounding our familiar concepts of name, sentence, referring, describing, truth, sense and nonsense, the meaning of an expression, meaning something by an expression, thought and understanding. These concepts are lacking in surveyability, and we are readily led astray in our reflections. So clarifying the web of linguistic, metalinguistic and associated cogitative concepts is necessary if we are to keep our reflections on language within the bounds of sense.

⁸ The point was first made in print by Wittgenstein in 1921 in the *Tractatus* 4.02 - 4.03 (derived from his 'Notes on Logic' of October, 1913), followed by Frege's discussion of 'thought-building blocks' in his 1923 article 'Compound Thoughts' (*Collected Papers*, p. 390); the idea first appears in Frege's *Nachlass* in his 1914 'Logic in Mathematics', *Posthumous Writings*, p. 225, after lengthy conversations with the young Wittgenstein in December 1913.

The anthropological approach does not advance an a priori *theory* of language, nor does it offer an *empirical theory* that might be confirmed or infirmed in experience. What it offers is an elucidation of concepts and conceptual connections. That does not mean that it is an assembly of piecemeal aperçus, for the web of linguistic and metalinguistic concepts (some of which were originally terms of art of grammarians and logicians) are not a pile of snippets of thread, but a finely woven network. Its description, by connective analysis, can and should be as systematic as is necessary for the resolution of the problem at hand. It systematically traces the nodes and links in the relevant portion of the web. But a systematic, connective-analytic description is not a theory.

Instead of placing the concept of truth at centre-stage, and with it the notion of representation and hence the notion of truth-condition, an anthropological conception of language places the notion of linguistic activity and interaction by means of language at centre-stage. That was why Wittgenstein felt that the idea of a language-game was so fruitful. For the elaboration of the idea of a language-game and of moves in a language-game integrates the use of words and sentences into human behaviour in the stream of life. The conception is anthropological in as much as it conceives of human language as an extension of human behaviour, and of human speech as a form of behaviour. It is ethnological, in as much as it conceives of human languages as partly constitutive of human forms of life or cultures.

5. The anthropological conceptions of language: the principles

The primary conceptual connections appertaining to word-meaning that link the nodes at the centre of the web of semantic concepts are the following:

- i. The meaning of a word is (with qualifications) its use in the language
- ii. The meaning of a word is what is given by an explanation of meaning
- iii. An explanation of meaning provides a rule for the use of a word
- iv. The meaning of a word (or phrase) is what is known (or understood) when one knows (or understands) what the word (or phrase) means
- v. The meaning of a word is its place in the web of words

vi. Knowing what a word means is being able to use it in accordance with accepted explanations of what it means, i.e. in accordance with the rules for its use. It is also being able to explain, or recognise as correct an explanation of what it means.

vii. Understanding is neither a process nor a state, but an ability.

viii. One's understanding of an utterance is exhibited in one's own speech no less than in one's comprehension of the speech of others – in the aptness of one's words and one's explanations of what one meant no less than in the aptness of one's responses to the words of others and in one's explanations of what the utterances of others mean. There is no greater problem about understanding novel utterances of others than there is about understanding novel utterances of one's own. In fact, there is no deep problem about either, only the deep illusion of a problem.

I shall make a few comments on these conceptual nodes and connecting strands.

The association of the meaning of a word with its rule-governed use is of course, Wittgenstein's. But he did not advance this as a 'use-theory of meaning'. First of all, he recognised clearly that 'use of a word' and 'meaning of a word' are not exact synonyms, even though they are often interchangeable. What he suggested was that in many contexts and for many purposes, replacing philosophical questions about meaning by normative questions about use will be helpful. He emphasized that the notion of word-use does not carry in its wake the multitude of misleading danglers associated with the phrase 'the meaning of a word'. The word 'use' immediately draws our attention to what we do with words, to the role of a word in a language-game, and to the point and purpose of a word. This, he held, was what we constantly need to be reminded of – for 'words are deeds'. Secondly, irrespective of Wittgenstein, we should note the kinds of exceptions to this important link: proper names (personal names) have a use but not a meaning that is pertinent to their use; morphology is an aspect of use, but not of meaning; there are inessential features of use that are not pertinent to meaning.

Wittgenstein taught us to attend to our practices of explanation of word-meaning. The anthropological approach, unlike the calculus one, is not tied to a geometrical prototype in its overview of explanations of meaning. Rather, we should *look and see!*

Explanations of word-meaning are not demanded in a vacuum. They are called for when there is some misunderstanding or lack of understanding, and they presuppose that the recipient has a substantial degree of linguistic competence. Hence it is not necessary explicitly to lay down rules differentiating a number from Julius Caesar, since it is not possible to confuse them.

Explanations of meaning are not a magical draught that will secure understanding come what may. No explanation of meaning is immune to misunderstanding. If an explanation is misunderstood, one can explain it. But all explanations come to an end at some point – which is not to say that there is some point at which all explanations of meaning come to an end. (Language has no foundations.)

The criterion for a successful explanation is whether the hearer goes on to use the word correctly. The criterion for understanding an explanation of meaning is that the hearer not only goes on to use the explanandum correctly, but conceives of his subsequent use as being in accord with the explanation, and of himself as following the explanation.

There are multiple licit forms of explanation of word-meaning. None is king in the pedagogical realm (in particular analytic definition is not). None ‘link language to reality’ (in particular ostensive explanations do not). Analytic definitions are the exception, not the rule. Many words can be explained in more than one way. Words cannot be grouped into definables and simple indefinables. There are words indefinable by analytic definition, but there are no words that cannot be explained in some way or other. For if there were, there would be no standard of correctness for their use, and hence no difference between using them correctly and using them incorrectly.

Explanations of meaning are themselves rules. They furnish us with standards for the correct use of the word explained. If the word ‘vixen’ is explained as meaning the same as the phrase ‘a female fox’, then any female fox can correctly be said to be a vixen. If ‘Oxford blue’ is explained as: *that* [☞] ■ colour, then anything which is *that* [☞] ■ colour can correctly be said to be Oxford blue. If ‘game’ is explained by saying that games are such things as cricket, soccer, bridge, poker, chess, draughts, and other things like these, then darts can correctly be said to be a game (although archery and war cannot).

I must pause here, and focus for a moment on normativity – on the rule-governed nature of language. Explanations of meaning are rules for the use of words. Linguists allocate them to what they call ‘the lexicon’, reserving the term ‘grammar’ for syntactical rules. From a philosophical point of view, that is, I think of little importance save for purposes of division of labour. What *is* important is that we recognise that speaking a language consists in following constitutive rules of language, just as playing a game involves following the constitutive rules of the game. Contrary to what is supposed by calculus theorists, there is no such thing as *following* an unknown rule, or following a rule that one cannot understand in some form or other. A rule is not an explanatory hypothesis, but (i) a guide to conduct, (ii) a warrant for conduct, and (iii) a standard of correctness. But one cannot be guided by what is unknown to one, cannot justify what one does by reference to something one cannot understand, and cannot consult a standard of correctness that is unintelligible to one.

Calculus conceptions and ethnological conceptions alike recognise the normativity of language. They both accept that the meanings of signs are determined by the rules for their use, that the combination of signs in phrases and sentences is governed by formation rules, and that the uses of significant sentences in communication is also governed, in various ways, by rules. The calculus conception, with axiomatic systems before its eyes, tends to exaggerate the degree of rule-governedness of language, on the one hand, and the sharpness of the rules, on the other. The ethnological conception, with games in mind, emphasizes the looseness of the rules and their contextualization. The great divide between the two conceptions is that according to calculus conceptions, rules of language may be unknown to all, awaiting discovery by linguists or philosophers, and may be ‘deeply buried in the mind/brain’ (Chomsky). According to anthropological conceptions the rules of language can no more be unknown to all than the rules of games could be unknown to all. There is an equally great divide over what either side recognises *as* a rule. Distinctive of the ethnological conception of language is to take the notion of a rule in a homely fashion that is recognisable to any speaker who has ever been called upon to explain what he or someone else said, what a word he used means, or who has been called upon or seen fit to correct his children’s or his

student's misuse of words. 'Not "they was", but "they were"' is a perfectly decent rule; so is 'Oxford blue is *that* ■ colour'; and equally 'You have not *refuted* what he said, you have just *repudiated* it'.

This disagreement ramifies. Precisely because the calculus theorist holds, like Frege, that concepts and conceptual connections are stored in a Platonic heaven awaiting our discovery (FA, p. vii) or, like the young Wittgenstein (TLP 4.002) and Chomsky, holds rules to be embedded in the mind/brain beyond the reach of consciousness, the requirements of normativity as such were not explored. That is, the question of what is requisite *for there to be* any such rules was not investigated. By contrast, clarification of precisely this point lies at the heart of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* §§143-242. Obviously, there can be no rules without regularities in the rule-governed behaviour (both sides could agree to this). But that does not suffice (since the rule is not an explanatory hypothesis, like a law of nature). The regularity must be *recognised* as such by the putative rule-follower, who must conceive or be able to conceive of the relevant conduct as exhibiting a uniformity. Moreover, he must view this uniformity *as a norm*, and *employ it* as such, i.e. as a standard of correctness. Rules can be said to obtain only *in the course of human practices*. For the internal relation between a rule and what counts as accord with it is *welded* in the practice of following the rule. Here lies another great divide.

Now, back to language-games. According to the ethnological conception of language, words are instruments for use in making moves in a language-game. *For the most part*, the minimal unit for making a move is the sentence. However, a sentence does not therefore have to be a complex of words (subject and predicate, or argument-name and function-name). Moreover, one can also perform speech-acts with single words that are not one-word sentences.

The sentence as such is not the bearer of truth-values at all. We must distinguish, as Strawson emphasized, between sentence, the meaning of a sentence, the utterance of a sentence, and what is said by the use of a sentence on an occasion.

What can be true or false is indeed what is said. But what is said, asked, ordered, wished, exclaimed, and so forth, need not be something that can intelligibly be evaluated as true or false at all.

Of course one can say that the meaning of a word consists in its contribution to the meaning of any sentence in which it occurs, for the meaning of a sentence does indeed depend upon (although it is not literally a function of) its constituent words. Explanations of meaning are indeed tailored to clarify precisely that – not contribution to something called ‘truth-conditions’. It does not follow that the meaning of a sentence is *composed* of the meanings of its constituent words – the meaning of a sentence is not composed of anything. Nor does it follow that one either can or needs to compute or calculate the meaning of an utterance from the meanings of the uttered words that one severally understands. Moreover, if we look to what are correctly characterized as explanations of word-meaning, the very diverse kinds of explanations we accept and recognise as correct are equally apt for any sentential form and discourse function in view.

Let me turn briefly to understanding and interpreting. According to the anthropological conceptions of language, understanding a word, sentence or utterance is akin to an ability. It is not a mental state, since it lacks ‘genuine duration’: it does not lapse with distraction of attention, it does not cease on loss of consciousness. Sudden understanding is the dawning of a cluster of abilities. Understanding the words of others consists in the ability to explain what they said, to respond cogently to what was said, and to act reasonably on the basis of what was said. The criteria of understanding consist in the manifestation of these abilities in appropriate contexts.

Although what another says may *sometimes* need interpreting, it is incoherent to suppose that *all* understanding is interpretation. First, interpretation of an utterance presupposes understanding. One cannot interpret, but only translate, an utterance like ‘Olug bashu inden’. Interpretation of an utterance, as opposed to translation, is called for when what is said can be taken to have more than one meaning or when there is some unclarity about its meaning.⁹ Secondly, if every sentence needed an interpretation, one could never understand any sentence. Thirdly, while one criterion of understanding is giving a correct explanation (which may be an interpretation) of what was said, one

⁹ Of course, there are many different kinds of interpretation. Laws of the land often need an interpretation, which is given by the courts. Legal documents commonly require an interpretation. Historical texts, especially if corrupted, need an interpretation; and so on. These are not in question here.

normally understands the words of another without any interpretation at all. For interpretation is called for only where more than one way of understanding is possible. Moreover, one does not usually exhibit one's understanding in an explanation. One's understanding is manifest (if it is manifest at all) in what one does and says in response to the spoken words. One's understanding consists in a cluster of abilities, and is manifest in their exercise.

Finally, the very idea that understanding the words of another involves *calculation*, *computation* or a process of *derivation* of any kind is chimerical. As remarked, it is striking that virtually nothing is said by calculus theorists about understanding *one's own words* when one speaks. To be sure, one speaks with understanding. But one does not interpret one's own words; and when one speaks, one normally knows what one is saying. But how is *that* possible? As far as I know, only Chomsky has commented on this question, which he dubbed 'Descartes's [production] problem'. Since he could not think of what to say about it, he declared that it was beyond the powers of the human mind to comprehend how we can intentionally speak and understand what we say.¹⁰

Although I cannot discuss here the bewilderment generated by the question of how we can understand sentences we have never heard before, it should be obvious that it is no more mysterious than our ability to utter, with understanding, sentences we have never uttered or heard before. And one thing should surely be clear about *this* ability – it is not the result of computing or deriving the meaning of the sentence we utter from the meanings of the words we utter and their mode of combination. Nor is it a question of *translating* non-linguistic thoughts into our language for the benefit of others.

6. Concluding observations

All the problems for calculus theorists of language that I have brought upon the carpet today are very

¹⁰ 'Descartes's problem' was held to be the problem of how we put our 'system of knowledge of a language' to use in speaking (by contrast with understanding the speech of another, which is to be explained computationally). Chomsky's answer was that a solution to Descartes's problem is probably beyond our reach: 'One possible reason for the lack of success in solving it or even presenting sensible ideas about it is that it is not within the range of human intellectual capacities. ... There is some reason to suspect that this may be so ...' *Language and the Problems of Knowledge* (MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1988), p. 151.

general indeed. That is why they are rarely examined, let alone critically confronted. I have not even mentioned the host of problems *internal to the enterprise*, such as the calculus theorists' treatment of the logical connectives and the definite article that were examined by Strawson, the characteristic uses of abstract nouns investigated by Bede Rundle, the well-known difficulties with adverbial modification that Anthony Kenny raised and Davidson tried unsuccessfully to tackle, the defective account of quantifiers and of multiple reference that has been explored and criticized by Hanoch Ben-Yami. These are problems *within* the form of representation. The problems I have mentioned are primarily framework problems. The difficulties are deep and ramifying. If I have characterized them correctly, the prospects for the calculus conception are poor. Nevertheless, these problems are disregarded – as epicycle is added to epicycle in a never-ending endeavour to present language by means of this particular form of representation and to elucidate features of natural language by reference to it. So I should like to end with a question. Is it not possible that the whole enterprise is misconceived? The New Way of Ideas mesmerized philosophers of the stature of Descartes, Spinoza, Hobbes, Locke, Arnauld, and Hume. Their successors, for the most part, continued to cleave to it until the bottom finally dropped out of the enterprise in the nineteenth century. It bewitched these geniuses – although it is difficult for us today to even imagine being caught in this web of illusion. Is it not possible, indeed is it not likely, that philosophers of language of the past half century or so have been and are similarly bewitched by what is no more than a form of representation?

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