

Part I

# The Expression Theory of Meaning



# I

## Introduction

We will begin with a brief overview of the three parts of this work. Part I briefly sets out the expression theory of meaning, and then extends it to four categories of terms with nondescriptive meaning. Part II provides an analysis of reference, defining speaker reference in terms of expression and intention, and begins examining the relationship between word meaning and word reference. Part III shows that the expression theory handles proper names with ease, and is superior to extant rivals.

### I.1 THE EXPRESSION THEORY OF MEANING

The fundamental fact on which the expression theory is based is that people can think, and have beliefs, desires, intentions, and other propositional attitudes. Thought, in the sense we focus on, is distinct from belief. We can think the thought that Germany was victorious in World War II even when we do not believe or desire that it was, and we can believe or desire that the Allies were victorious even when we are not thinking the thought that they were. Thinking plays a distinct and essential role in action and emotion. A man cannot intentionally turn off the stove, for example, unless he thinks about turning off the stove at the appropriate time. Tautologically, we think thoughts. The thought that the sky is blue is a type of event that has occurred and will occur to people all over the world. Thinking is the occurrence of thoughts. All the other propositional attitudes are relations to these event types. While the syntactic properties of thoughts are most important in accounting for meaning, thoughts also have associative or connectionist properties, which play a key role, for example, in the process of understanding speech and writing.

The fundamental fact on which the compositionality of meaning is based is that thoughts are complex events. They have parts. Compound thoughts have other thoughts as parts, but even simple thoughts have parts. We use the terms 'idea' and 'concept' interchangeably and exclusively for thoughts and those thought parts that make a difference to the qualitative character and attitudinal status of the thoughts containing them. The idea of water is such a thought part, which occurs in the thought that water is wet as well as

the thought that there is little water in the desert. To think of water is for that idea to occur to us. Ideas in this sense are neither sensory images (perception-like complexes of sensations) nor conceptions (systems of belief about something). As a useful analogy, we can say that thoughts are sentence-like mental representations. Ideas stand to thoughts roughly as words stand to sentences. But thoughts are not literally sentences, and thinking is not a relation to sentences. In particular, while the object or content of an idea is similar in some respects to the meaning of a word, there are critical differences. For an idea to have the content *water* is for it to be the idea of water. The content of an idea is thus an intrinsic, essential property: it makes no sense to suppose that the idea of water should change its content, or to ask how it acquired this content. Ideas are 'individuated' by their content. The meaning of the word 'water', in contrast, is something that word acquired at a certain point in the history of the English language, and may well change in the future. Words can have more than one meaning, and different words can have the same meaning. Having an object or content is an intentional property, not a relation, despite grammatical appearances. 'Santa Claus is the object of the idea of Santa Claus' is true even though the idea cannot stand in any relation to Santa because Santa does not exist. The idea of water differs in content from the idea of H<sub>2</sub>O, moreover, despite the fact that water and H<sub>2</sub>O are the same substance. What it is to be thinking of water, and how we acquire the ability to think of it, are important questions. But they are not linguistic issues. The answers are in all probability largely neurophysiological.

Given the importance to us of referring to ideas, we will pay special attention to indexical descriptions like 'the idea of water' or 'the thought that water is wet' (or alternatively, 'the idea "water" ' and 'the thought "water is wet" '). On my view, we use such expressions to refer deictically to the ideas expressed by the words following 'of' or 'that'. We express certain ideas when we use 'water' or 'water is wet' in these contexts, and we are introspectively aware of the ideas expressed. Those ideas are the referents of 'the idea of water' and 'the thought that water is wet' respectively. Such ideo-reflexive reference is as rigid and direct as deictic reference generally. (I will treat ideo-reflexive phrases in more depth in *Indexicals*.)

Thoughts are private. We often know what other people are thinking, but we cannot see, hear, smell, taste, or feel their thoughts in the way that we can see their hair, hear their words, or feel their temperature. We know our own thoughts by introspection. Because we wish to make our mental states known to others, or simply because we want to, we often provide observable indications of the ideas occurring to us. To do this in a certain way is to express the ideas. In general, to express a mental state is to do something with the intention of providing an undisguised indication that we are in that state, one that is not a feigned unintentional indication. While implying

involves indirect expression, speaker meaning involves the direct expression of ideas, beliefs, and other mental states. A speaker means "Theodore Roosevelt was an unmarried man" by 'Roosevelt was a bachelor' iff the speaker directly expressed the thought that Theodore Roosevelt was an unmarried man by uttering that sentence. As is natural given its importance in our lives, we have many specialized terms for the expression of ideas. A woman refers to Theodore Roosevelt provided she verbally expresses the idea of Theodore Roosevelt, directly or indirectly. Mentioning Roosevelt requires use of a word that refers to him. A man communicates a thought to a woman only if he expresses the thought and she recognizes that he expressed it. Telling and informing require more specific intentions.

Like other acts, the expression of ideas can be conventional or unconventional. An action is conventional if it is a socially useful and self-perpetuating but arbitrary regularity. As a first approximation, word meaning is conventional speaker meaning. The word 'vixen' means "female fox" because it is conventional for speakers to use 'vixen' to mean "female fox". Communication is the common interest that primarily sustains linguistic conventions. In addition to conventions governing the use of individual words, there are also conventions to use certain word structures to express particular idea structures. Noun phrases of the form 'N Ver' mean either "Ver of Ns" or "N that Vs" because it is conventional to use expressions of the form 'N Ver' both to express ideas of the form "Ver of Ns" and to express ideas of the form "N that Vs". Consequently 'female inspector' means either "inspector of females" or "female that inspects". These construction conventions make possible a recursive definition of word meaning. The base clause assigns meanings to individual words, dead metaphors, and the like on the basis of what people conventionally mean by them. The recursion clause assigns meanings to phrases, clauses, and sentences on the basis of the meanings of the component words and the conventions pairing word structures with idea structures. The recursion clause assigns meanings to novel expressions for which there are no special conventions because they have never been used.

This definition of word meaning must be relativized to living languages. Languages in general are systems of modes of expression, which pair expressions with ideas or other mental states. Living languages are those that depend on the conventional usage of an evolving lineage of speakers. A natural language is discovered and named when a group of speakers is isolated with a distinctive way of expressing ideas. As the conventions perpetuate themselves over time, they are passed to new members of the speech community. Since conventions are seldom perfect regularities, they can change over time. Previously unconventional uses can spread and become conventional. What words mean in a living language today is determined by the conventional usage of the linguistic descendants of prior users. Languages die when use becomes too uncommon to perpetuate itself. In

artificial languages, words mean what they do as a result of stipulation rather than convention. And in idiolects, words mean what they do because of personal practices of the individual.

Ideational theories have been thought to be materially inadequate because some meaningful terms do not express ideas (e.g., syncategorematic terms), or cannot be fully explained in terms of the expression of ideas (e.g., pejorative terms). I will argue that in fact syncategorematic terms do express thought parts. But I accept the general point that meaning does not consist exclusively in the expression of ideas. We will here look more closely at the mental states other than ideas that interjections, pejorative terms, and terms with conventional implicatures express.

Traditional ideational theories have been burdened with the assumption that ideas must be images of some sort. It is true that meaning cannot be defined in terms of images, but we define ideas not as images but as thought parts. Thinking is distinct from inner speech and the imagery that accompanies it. Other mentalistic theories have tried without success to define meaning in terms of conceptions—systems of belief—which are concepts in a different sense. Speakers with very different conceptions of man may nevertheless mean the same thing by ‘man’. Many mentalistic theories have erred by saying that meanings *are* ideas. Such an identification is not essential to ideational theories, however, and I have argued against it.

One of the most influential objections to ideational theories is that they are regressive or circular in some way because ideational content is either a type of meaning itself, or something that must be defined in terms of meaning. This too is a mistake. The meanings of words are properties of words, which are dependent on conventions or other external factors. The contents of ideas are intrinsic, identifying properties of ideas. A subsidiary objection is that ideational theories are incomplete because they do not say what ideas are or provide a theory of content for them. But every theory is incomplete in that it does not define its primitive terms, or explain everything. A referential theory of meaning that identifies the meaning of the word ‘quark’ with the set of quarks cannot be faulted for failing to tell us what quarks or sets are. There is no more reason to require that an ideational theory of meaning must tell us what it is for people to think. The objection that ideational theories are incomplete because they do not account for truth and reference will be addressed by showing how these subjects can be treated within an ideational semantics.

## I.2 REFERENCE

Thoughts and ideas are mental representations. The idea of water represents water, and the thought that water is wet represents water as being wet. When what an idea represents exists, we call what it represents the extension of the

idea. The word ‘water’ refers to water because water is the extension of the idea the word expresses. The sentence ‘water is wet’ is true because the thought it expresses is true. In general, the referential properties of words are determined by the extensions of the ideas they express. As important as word reference and truth is, it cannot be equated with meaning. For we find words with the same reference but different meanings (‘water’, ‘H<sub>2</sub>O’) and words with a meaning but no reference at all (‘Santa Claus’). This is possible because what different ideas represent may turn out to be identical, and because we can think of things that do not exist. In an ideational semantics, words are assigned to ideas. The extensional properties of ideas can be set out recursively by providing a generative theory of ideas, assigning extensions to atomic ideas, and formulating the rules whereby the extension of a complex idea is determined by the extensions of its components. The same can be done for intensions, characters, and other ‘semantic values’.

Unlike word reference, speaker reference is an intentional notion in Brentano’s sense. We can and often do refer to things that do not exist. We will critically examine the arguments of Donnellan and others for thinking otherwise, and review the many defects in causal theories of reference. We will see that the standard externalist conclusions drawn from the Twin Earth examples are invalid, such as that speaker reference is not determined by intention. While ‘S referred to  $\Phi$ ’ and other psychological statements do have a transparent interpretation, we will generally be focusing on their opaque interpretation.

### 1.3 NAMES AND NONDESCRIPTIVE MEANING

Standard proper names have been hard cases for theories of meaning because of the groundless assumption that if names have any meaning at all beyond their reference, they must have a *descriptive* meaning. Kripkean arguments against the description theory show that names do not have descriptive meanings. Frege’s and Russell’s problems show that the meaning of a name cannot be identified with its reference. Some Millians have attempted to explain away apparent failures of substitutivity as illusions based on implicatures. We will see that such explanations are unsuccessful, and are no help with Russell’s problem. The proper conclusion to draw is that standard names have nondescriptive senses.

The expression theory has no difficulty with names. The word ‘Aristotle’ is meaningful because it is conventionally used to express the idea of Aristotle. ‘Santa Claus’ is meaningful because it expresses the idea of Santa Claus, even though Santa does not exist. ‘Cary Grant’ and ‘Archibald Leach’ differ in meaning because the ideas they express are different despite the fact that Cary Grant and Archibald Leach are in fact the same person.

Names are ‘directly referential’ in the sense that their reference is not determined by any descriptive concept. The extension of a name concept is determined directly by its content and not by the extensions of its components. What the arguments against the description theory show is that the ideas expressed by proper names are atomic or basic. There must be some ideas that do not have other ideas as parts. The evidence showing that names are not synonymous with any descriptive phrases can be easily accounted for by the hypothesis that names express some of the atomic ideas. There is no more reason to insist that nominal concepts must contain descriptive concepts than there is to insist that descriptive concepts must contain nominal concepts. There appear to be at least four categories of atomic or basic concepts, expressed respectively by names, descriptive general terms, syncategorematic terms like logical particles, and pronouns. Three of the four categories have nondescriptive meaning.

The fact that names with different meanings can nonetheless have the same reference means that identity statements made using them can be true without being logical or epistemic necessities. We will show how standard arguments that the necessity of identity is a logical truth go astray, and how a possible worlds semantics for names can be developed without it. We will show too how a formal semantics can be provided within both ideational and situational frameworks.

#### 1.4 THE GRICEAN PROGRAM

The expression theory thus realizes Grice’s program of defining word meaning in terms of speaker meaning, and speaker meaning in terms of speaker intention. By defining speaker meaning in terms of evidential meaning as well as intention, and focusing on thoughts and ideas rather than beliefs, exploiting their complexity, it avoids the problems Grice and his followers encountered. The theory is simultaneously a use theory and an ideational theory, intentionalist and conventionalist, while avoiding the traditional flaws of these approaches. The expression theory accounts fully for the referential properties of expressions without identifying meaning with reference. The theory has the strength of Fregean approaches without their descriptivist bias. It has the virtues of Millian approaches without their referentialist shortcomings. The expression theory explains fundamental linguistic concepts in terms of elementary psychological concepts, and thus contributes to the systematization of our knowledge of the mind. As is normal in cognitive science, or any other field of intellectual inquiry, many important questions remain to be answered. But the expression theory is, I believe, the most viable foundational theory of meaning.