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On Meaning

The general aim of this paper is to evaluate theories of linguistic meaning in terms of their success in accounting for definitions of “meaning” derived from common usage. To this end we first examine the use of the terms “meaning” and “nonsense” in ordinary language to establish several definitions. We then examine the theories of meaning provided by Frege, and Russell. We shall argue that both Russell’s and Frege’s theories have limitations in capturing the full range of application of “meaning”. Finally we offer suggestions to extend a theory of meaning to encompass a greater range of expressions to which we attribute meaning.

For the purposes of this paper, we define a *linguistic phrase* (LP) as an *uttered* word, adjective phrase, noun phrase, verb phrase, sentence, or clause. Further, we assume the following intuitive principle of substitution:

*) If two LPs α and β have the same meaning, then a more complex LP containing either α or β as a constituent will mean the same thing when one constituent LP is substituted in place of the other.

Consulting *OED* for examples of usage, and the lexicographer’s definitions we have:

Meaning:

- a. The significance, purpose, underlying truth, etc..., of something.
“The symbol is so graceful that one is quite eager to know its meaning.”
- b. The significance, import; implication.
“It makes you begin to question the meaning of everything you believe.”

Nonsense:

- d. That which is not sense; absurd or meaningless words or ideas.
“I am writing nonsense, but it is because no sense within my mind will answer the purpose.”

c. Foolish or extravagant conduct; silliness, misbehavior.
“Haven’t you done with your nonsense yet.”

The lexicographers have blended together several ideas in some definitions above which we will tease apart in the construction of our own definitions. While it is not the English idiom to be able to substitute “not nonsense” for every occurrence of “meaning”, from the examples above it seems we can do pretty well at expressing the range of concepts captured by nonsense by negating the definitions of meaning we’ve developed below.

Definitions are cast in adjectival form, so as not to presuppose any ontological commitments. To avoid stilted unnatural language, I will however not be consistent in the adjectival usage throughout the paper.

M1) A *meaningful* LP is one which has significance.

M2) A *meaningful* LP is one which has underlying truth (a truth value).

M3) A *meaningful* LP is one which has a purpose.

N1) A *nonsense* LP is one which is not significant.

N2) A *nonsense* LP is one which has no underlying truth (no truth value).

N3) A *nonsense* LP is one which has no purpose.

The easiest way to begin the discussion of meaning is to discuss theories of proper names. As names are not things which can be true or false we are left to consider M1 and M3. What is the purpose of a name? What is its significance? It seems intuitive to say that the purpose of a name is to refer to something; that names are significant in virtue of their referring to something. So upon this analysis, M1 and M3 may be collapsed into a single definition. There are however problems with this view. For one thing there are names which don’t seem to refer to any actual object, like “Pegasus”, or “Captain Kirk”. If we accept this analysis then “Pegasus” and “Captain Kirk” are nonsense names as they have no purpose and no significance. One can argue that they have both. Another objection is that if two names refer to the same object and their significance is due solely

to what they refer then by (*), sentences (1) and (2) below should have the same significance.

- (1) The Morning Star is The Evening Star.
- (2) The Morning Star is the Morning Star.

But (1) seems to say that the thing called “The Morning Star” is the same as the thing called “The Evening Star” which is an informative statement, whereas (2) expresses the empty tautology that the thing called “The Morning Star” is the same as the thing called “The Morning Star.”

Frege offers a solution to this quandary in his analysis of meaning. For Frege the meaning of a LP consists of two parts: a referent and a sense. A referent is, as we have discussed above in the case of proper names, something which a LP refers to, whereas a sense is the way in which a referent is determined by a LP. So, for Frege some names, those to which there corresponds an actual thing present in the world, have referents, and other names, those to which there does not correspond an actual thing present in the world, do not. Names of both types however have senses which may be thought of as some sort of cognitive description for which there might be some fitting object in the world. For instance, of the four names so far mentioned their senses may be listed:

The Morning Star: *The brightest star in the morning sky.*

The Evening Star: *The brightest star in the evening sky.*

Pegasus: *The winged divine stallion foaled by the Gorgon Medusa.*

James Tiberius Kirk: *The person born on March 22, 2233, in Riverside, Iowa, by his parents, George and Winona Kirk.*

The solution to the two points elaborated for our quandary is that fictional names have sense but no reference, and pairs of names like “The Morning Star” and “The Evening Star” have different senses but the same referents.

While the above solution seems plausible there is something strange about attributing meaning to isolated names. To simply say “Barack Obama” to another person leaves open the question of whether the utterance satisfies (M1), or (M3). In other words, it is arguable that if the utterance “Barack Obama” is not embedded in a sentence or elliptical construction (as in a response to a question or a prompt) then the utterance has no significance, no truth value, and no purpose. So, there is motivation to explore the role that constituent elements of sentences such as names play in the composition of meaning in larger phrases and sentences.

Frege’s conceptions of sense and reference apply not only to constituent elements of sentences like names but to entire sentences as well. In Frege’s theory, the sense of a declarative sentence is a proposition, and the reference of a declarative sentence is a truth value. So, roughly speaking, a sentence has M1 meaning due to its sense, and M2 meaning due to its truth value. For Frege the meaning of a declarative sentence is derived from its constituent elements. So the senses of constituent elements in a sentence combine to give the sense of its associated proposition. If some constituent element of a sentence fails to refer, then the sentence as a whole fails to have a referent, i.e., has no truth value. Frege is equally happy to call both (3) and (4) below N2 nonsensical:

- 3) The present king of France is bald.
- 4) Pegasus is the winged divine stallion foaled by Medusa.

The analysis that the failure of reference of constituent terms entails the failure of reference of an entire sentence has a possible objection. Considering this analysis correct, if (3) is embedded in a belief ascription sentence as in (5) below, then as (3) has no reference (no truth value), it stands to reason from Frege’s composition principle that (5) has no truth value. But (5) is a sentence that is determinately true or false.

(5) Barack Obama believes that the king of France is bald.

Frege has a good response to such an objection. Frege regards (6) below as a true statement, because even though “The king of France” fails to refer, quotation marks around a phrase shift its referent to its sense, which seems reasonable when we consider the difference in meaning of (6) and (7).

(6) “The present king of France” fails to refer.

(7) The present king of France fails to refer.

In much the same way, sentences embedded in subordinate clauses have their referents shifted to the sense of the sentence. So, (5) describes Barack Obama believing a proposition, not a truth value.

Russell argued against Frege’s theory from the observation that rather than being nonsense (3) is clearly false. One might respond that if Russell is simply appealing to intuition this is an unconvincing attack as one can equally well respond to (3) by saying either, “That’s not true,” or “That’s nonsense.” This objection is not itself convincing as it is unclear if the intuitively acceptable “That’s nonsense,” response is related to the negation of M2 or to some other of our definitions of meaningful. While Russell’s example may seem trivial, there are sentences that are more troubling for Frege’s theory. In theoretical sciences, statements like (8) below are often made about things which turn out not to exist.

(8) If the firmament exists and the earth is the center of the universe then the stars in the outer sphere are equidistant from the center of the earth.

Frege’s theory judges (8) as nonsense, but (8) is determinately true. In any case we can avoid appealing to intuition about nonsense by instead appealing to the semantic principle

of bivalence which states that every declarative sentence expressing a true proposition is either true or false.

Russell elaborated a theory upholding the principle of bivalence in cases where LPs, according to Frege's theory, fail to have truth values. In general the theory holds that expressions like, "a man", "the king of France", and "every person", which he calls denoting phrases, have no meaning in themselves, but every proposition which contains them has a meaning. Rather than performing some function of reference, denoting phrases contribute to the description of a variable which is a constituent of a proposition. For instance below, if x is a variable, $C(x)$ is a proposition in (i), and $C(x) = x$ walks, in (ii) we have:

- (i) 'C(a king)' means ' "C(x) and x rules" is not always false.'
- (ii) 'A king walks.' means ' "x walks and x rules" is not always false.'

- (i) 'C(all kings)' means ' "If x rules then C(x)" is always true.'
- (ii) 'All kings walk' means ' "If x rules then x walks" is always true.'

- (i) 'C(no kings)' means ' "C(x) and x rules" is always false.'
- (ii) 'No kings walk' means ' "x walks and x rules" is always false.'

Propositions containing denoting phrases which use the definite article "the" are more complex as they involve an existence and a uniqueness claim. So, according to Russell, (3) means:

(7) At present, it is not always false of x that x rules France and x is bald and "if y rules France then $y = x$ " is always true.

Or in the more familiar language of predicate logic:

(8) At present, (There exists an x such that) (x rules France and x is bald and (for every y) (if y rules France then $y = x$)).

So, denoting phrases are not analyzable outside the context of a sentence. (3) is false under this analysis as there is no entity which satisfies the existence claim implied

by the definite description. As well we can happily employ sentences like (8) in the pursuit of developing theoretical sciences without being concerned that we are making use of nonsense. Under this theory the sentence is the basic bearer of meaning and well-formed sentences cannot be N2 nonsense. In fact the only way a sentence can be nonsense is if it is not well-formed. Russell admits that phrases below the sentence level have no meaning so we can assume that in his theory, considering our analysis of nonsense as the negation of one or another definition of meaning, that the utterance of such phrases in isolation is nonsense. This fits with our earlier intuition.

Russell's theory ensures the meaningfulness of scientific discourse, but it has some troubling things to say about fictional discourse. The meaning it attributes to fictional sentences like (4) is that they are false. As conscientious adults this is of course something we wish to be understood by the children we regale with such tales. However, we would like a theory of meaning to be able to say something about fictional discourse beyond its inherent falsity. By Frege's theory, fictional discourse is N2 nonsense. While we have seen ample reason to disregard this conclusion, his motivation for this pronouncement stems from a penetrating insight. When people engage in fictional discourse truth values aren't something they are generally concerned with. In Fregean terms, people are concerned with the sense of the LPs in fictional discourse rather than the referents. Frege envisions fictional discourse as conjuring entertaining thoughts which need have no bearing on reality. So, fictional discourse has M1 meaning but fails to have M2 meaning.

Frege's conclusion that fictional discourse is nonsense, and Russell's conclusion that fictional discourse is false, while different, stem from a shared presupposition: M2

meaning is the primary concern of a theory of meaning. Frege calls fiction nonsense, giving no weight to fact that the purpose of fiction is different than the purpose of scientific discourse. Russell calls fiction false by the same error. However, there is reason to think that M3 meaning is a more general notion for a theory of linguistic meaning to be concerned with. The difference in the *purpose* of fictional discourse explains how it can be significant while having little or no concern for truth values. Also, differences in purpose can account for the attribution of meaning to non-declarative utterances such as exclamatory and imperative utterances.

As Austin notes, the meaning of even some simple declarative sentences does not depend on their truth values. Take for instance LPs such as (9) “I thee wed,” or (10) “I bet you twenty dollars,” which we’ll label as unconventionally declarative, or UD.

Reasonable responses to ordinary declarative utterances in most circumstances include saying “That’s true,” and “That’s false”. However, it seems absurd in any circumstances to respond to (9) or (10) as either true or false, although there are circumstances in which we might reasonably respond, “That’s nonsense.” Now when we say “That’s nonsense” in response to this type of phrase, we don’t mean that the statement has no truth value. What we mean is there is no significance in uttering such a comment given the purpose it is customarily intended for.

Given these concerns one might propose something along the lines of the theory sketched below.

- I) To say a LP is to perform an action.
- II) There are different types of LPs which have different conventionally determined purposes.
- III) A type χ LP is meaningful if and only if fits the conventionally determined purpose of making such an LP.

To elaborate, first we evaluate the case of declarative sentences uttered with the purpose of expressing facts. Here we can say that sentences with no truth values do not fit the purpose of expressing facts, and are hence meaningless if you intend to express a fact. This theory offers the satisfying and intuitive conclusion that political speeches are often filled with nonsense as they contain many sentences which are too vague or ambiguous to have a determinate truth value. The work of Frege and Russell still serves for a finer analysis of the meanings of ordinary declarative sentences. However, in the case of fictional and other types of sentences, where the attribution of truth values is an ancillary concern, there is a great deal of work to be done in determining what finer metric of meaning to use in place of M2. The work of cultural anthropologists, speech act theorists, and philosophers of fiction would be invaluable in the development of such a theory. A concern for this theory is that fictional sentences and UD statements ostensibly have different conventionally determined purposes than declarative sentences which are uttered to report facts, yet they show no distinguishing syntactic features. In order for this theory to work one must explain how to determine the type of a LP beyond its syntactic features.

Developing a theory of meaning based on the purpose of an utterance is a move towards generalizing theories of meaning to wider ranges of discourse. However, the presented list of definitions for “meaning” derived from common usage is not exhaustive.

The definitions below seem just as plausible as the others listed.

(M*) A *meaningful* LP is understandable.

(N*) A *nonsense* LP is not understandable.

These definitions raise some interesting questions about meaning. For instance there are lots of ways we can fail to understand a LP, ranging from ignorance of vocabulary,

improper syntax, ambiguity, vagueness, complicated phrasing, the representation of a complex concept with a single symbol, to paradox. Is it possible to refine this list to a small number of primitive phenomena which bear on the understanding of language? Also, (M*) is the relevant definition for many uses of “meaning” with relative terms such as “more” and “less”. In how many dimensions is it possible to be more or less meaningful? A fully developed theory of meaning should provide answers these questions as well.

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