



The Problem of Meaning

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Abstract : Philosophical attempts dealing with the nature and criteria of meaning can be brought under the title 'The Theory of Meaning'. In contemporary western philosophy it was felt that the most of the philosophical problems are linguistic problems, and they can be solved by clarifying the meaning of language. For this task they adopted analytic measures and methods. Some of the theories of meaning are denotation theory of meaning, picture theory of meaning and verification theory of meaning which developed in the western contemporary analytic philosophy.

Keywords : Meaning, Denotation, Meaningful, Conditionality, Descriptions, Connotation Sense, Reference Atomism, Correspondence, Picture, Verification.

Denotation theory : The question, what kind of object is the meaning of a word supposed to be of the question what things can be subjects of the verb 'mean', is answered by denotation theory of meaning, that the meaning of a word is that of which the word is the name or in other words the 'bearer' of this name. The meaning of a name then is the bearer of the name and since a name is said to denote it's bearer, the theory may be called the denotation theory. Denotative, referential theories of meaning use the notions like, naming referring to, or standing for, to denote the meaning of a word. Naming theories of meaning say that a word's meaning is what it names or stands for, or else it's relation to that. There is the slogan 'for every name there is exactly one thing named'. Proper names are taken as the primary case. It has its nickname the 'Fido'-Fido theory. The word 'Fido' has its meaning, the dog Fido, which it names. Russell's view on this theory is that a general word like 'dog' could stand for the universal doghood or the class of dogs, or different dogs on different occasions or 'Red' could stand for the colour red, 'runs' and 'running' for the action of running, even perhaps 'if' for the notion of doubt or conditionality. Natural answer to the question, what it is for a word to have meaning is, that a meaningful word stands for something, whereas a meaningless one does not. The meaning of a word on this view, is a kind of object, and depending on the presence or absence of an object of this kind, a word is meaningful or meaningless.

Such a theory of meaning was presupposed by Bertrand Russell, in his analysis of what he called definite descriptions¹, by which he meant phrases of the form 'the-so-and-so' or 'the-such-and- such, where what is

referred to, is an individual and not a class, 'the present prime minister of India, for example, as supposed to 'the dog' as the words are used in the sentence 'the dog is a friend of man'.

For the answer of the question, about kinds of meaning and related notions, this theory distinguishes between intention (roughly: what a word means) and extension (roughly: what it applies to). "Intention and extension are related in the same way as what a term means and what it applies to are related, but both are complex and ambiguous."²

Extensions correspond roughly to classes and intentions to properties. A property like that of being a man, determines at most one class. Mill distinguishes connotation from denotation. A word denotes the things it applies to, and connotes the attributes it applies that those things have. 'Man' connotes the attribute being a rational animal and denotes all men.' Connotation can refer to the relation or to what is connoted and denotation can refer to the thing what is denoted.

Frege distinguishes between sense (Sinn) and reference (Bedeutung). He also pointed out that two phrases which differ in meaning or 'sense' can stand for the same object can have, as the same 'reference'. Russell prefers 'denotation' to 'reference' of Frege. Notions like connotation and Frege's 'sense' are called intentions. Denotation and Frege's 'reference' and also classes, can all be called extensions. The comprehension of 'man' is the whole set of properties shared by all men, or else the set which (logically) must be shared by them.

Russell devised denotation theory to analyze sentences containing 'denoting phrases'. He originally recognized two ways of picking something out in discourse. One should name it or one could denote it; pick it out by using terms with a general meaning. 'Socrates' names Socrates. 'That man' does not name Socrates or anyone, but might serve to pick Socrates out because of general rules for the use of 'that' and 'man'. Russell there for recognized what he called denoting phrases. These were of two kinds. Definite descriptions begin with the definite article or its equivalent. ('That man equals 'The man over there') indefinite descriptions begin with the indefinite article. But because definite and indefinite description can occur in meaningful sentences where there is nothing for them to denote, as in 'The present King of the France is bald', he concluded that they cannot really function by denoting after all and that the grammatical form of sentences containing them is misleading as to their logical form. The theory of descriptions says that 'there is one and only one person now reigning over France, and there is no one now reigning over France who is not bald. Since what a sentence means should not depend on what happens to exist, Russell applied this analysis to all denoting phrases. These phrases are called incomplete symbols. Contrasted with denoting phrases are logically proper names, whose meaning is what they name. Ordinary proper names which do not name anything (and ultimately for various reasons all ordinary proper names), he regarded as disguised descriptions, and so as incomplete symbols, e.g. 'Apollo' stands for 'The Greek Sun-god'.)

Proper names which provide the model of meaning for naming theories, raise problems about whether they have connotation or sense or both. In what sense are proper names words? Do they form part of a language? Russell followed Mill in thinking they lack connotation. However he thought this only of logically proper names, i.e. those names which were not abbreviated descriptions, as he thought ordinary proper names in fact were. He thought 'Socrates' was not really a name at all but an abbreviation for, 'the philosopher who drank hemlock'. Logical subject is either the subject of a sentence in a logically ideal language i.e. a language where a sentence's real and apparent subjects coincide or it is what such a subject refers to.

Picture Theory : Picture theory is especially associated with logical atomism, and with the correspondence theory of truth. According to logical atomism, propositions are built out of elements corresponding to the basic constituents of the world, just as sentences are built out of words. The combination of words in a meaningful sentence mirrors the combination of constituents in the corresponding proposition and also in the corresponding possible or actual state of affairs.

On picture theories sentences with the true or false, have meaning because they picture possibilities; true sentences picture those possibilities which are facts. The 'picture' theory of meaning stated by Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* is a theory of the meaning of sentences. Wittgenstein held that there must be a host of absolutely simple proposition in ordinary language having no logical complexity. All other propositions of any language he held can be regarded as being truth-functions of these elementary prepositions. Necessary truths will have the character of the tautology of the logic, impossible propositions (such as 'it is raining and it is not raining') will have the character of the contradictions of the logic; and the remainder including all the elementary propositions will be empirical propositions corresponding to the truth functions of logic which will be true in some conditions, falls in others and whose truth cannot be ascertained by logical means. Tautology and contradictions are not pictures of reality. They exhibit no possible state of affairs. For the one allows every possible state of affairs, the other none. (4.462)³

According to Wittgenstein sentences picture facts. Words are things; a jumble of words would be nothing more than a collection of things. But a sentence with Wittgenstein emphasized, is not merely a jumble of words; it is a complex of words with an internal structure, when considered as a vehicle of thought.

Picturing means the relation of a sentence to a fact. It is similar to the relation of a musical score to a piece of music; that each case there is a similarity of structure between the terms of the relation' that the similarity of structure lies in the fact that there is a general rule for the construction or reconstruction of one from the other. This general rule can be called a law of projection, or to say the same thing in terms more appropriate to the case of language, a rule of translation. Understanding a language, therefore, is knowing the general rule for reconstructing the facts which fit sentences or for constructing sentences to fit facts and there is a similarity of structure because it is possible to give such a rule.

A language was conceived by the atomists as being basically and indefinitely large collection of simple, elementary, or as it was often put, atomic propositions the truth of which had to be settled by extra-logical, empirical methods; any statement which does not consist of a single atomic proposition is nearly a truth-function of such atomic propositions and it's truth or falsity can be determined simply by determining the truth or falsity of the atomic propositions it contains. Therefore, in a sense, there is nothing to be said beyond what can be said in atomic propositions. But a proposition is made true by its correspondence with fact. Therefore the World must consist of an indefinitely large number of atomic facts to which the true atomic propositions will correspond; and as the atomic propositions are conceived as being logically independent, so these facts must be conceived as being metaphysically independent. Without such correspondence between language and fact it seemed to the logical atomists that it would be impossible to talk about the world at all. According to them language consists essentially of nothing but atomic propositions there can be nothing to say about the world except to report in atomic propositions those atomic facts to which the atomic propositions correspond. The most important characteristic doctrines of logical automation have been that it

explains the relation between facts and their ingredients and the question of what different types of facts could be admitted on atomistic principles, and finally the relation of language and the world, or picture of fact. The world is taken to be of identical structure with and to be perfectly representable by a language with the structure of logical language.

Verification Theory of Meaning : The verification principle is a criterion of meaning according to that "A sentence is factually significant to a given person if, and only if, he knows how to verify the proposition which it purports to express."⁴ In each case the verification referred to is verification by means of observations.

The principle of verification is the criterion of 'meaning'. Ayer's Criteria of meaning allows only two kinds of propositions to be meaningful that are analytic and empirical or synthetic propositions. According to him all synthetic propositions have to be verified by sense perception and then only they can be considered meaningful where as analytic proposition is a tautology. Ayer writes, "I have, perhaps tendentiously, used the expression 'literal meaning' to distinguish this use from the others, while applying this expression 'factual meaning' as of statements which satisfy my criteria without being analytic. Furthermore, I suggest that it is only if it is literally meaningful, in this sense that a statement can properly said to be either true or false."⁵ A.J. Ayer said a 'proposition' expressed in a sentence should be literally meaningful. According to him 'literal meaning' is derived from 'factual meaning'. A statement is factually meaningful if it is empirically verifiable which means verifiability of sense perception. Consequently, a statement is literally meaningful if it is 'factually meaningful'. Ayer wished that the principle of verification not to be regarded, as an empirical hypothesis, but as a definition, it is not supposed to be entirely arbitrary.

The verification principle attended with considerable difficulties for example it would seem absurd to deny that the universal laws of the sciences have factual meaning; yet, if to verify something means to establish or prove its truth, then it is not clear how one can verify an assertion which is about (say) absolutely all particles of matter. The verification of assertions about the past also raises problems; for can one, by means of observations that are made now, or that can be made in future, prove the truth of some assertion about what happened in the past, and is no longer observable?

Ayer suggested that the word 'verify' must be taken in a more liberal sense, Ayer speaks of direct and indirect verification of statement with regard to the empirical statements. The principle of verification as requiring of literally meaningful statement, which is not analytic, that it should be either directly or indirectly verifiable. Ayer said that there are certain empirical propositions that can be verified conclusively, in the sense that they are directly given in sense-experience. What Ayer meant by indirect verification? Let me quote Ayer's own words, "I propose to say that a statement is indirectly verifiable if it satisfies the following conditions: first, that in conjunction with certain other premises it entails one or more directly verifiable statements which are not deducible from these other premises alone; and secondly, that these other premises do not include any statement that is not either analytic, or directly verifiable, or capable of being independently established as indirectly verifiable."⁶

A.J. Ayer made another distinction between the 'strong' and the 'weak' sense or conclusive and probable sense of the term 'verifiable'. Ayer makes sharp distinction between the strong and the weak sense of the term verifiability. "A proposition is said to be verifiable in the strong sense of the term, if and only if its truth

would be conclusively established in experience," but that "it is verifiable in the weak sense, if it is possible for experience to render it probable."⁷ Ayer accepted the weak sense of the term that is required by his principle of verification. The reason is that if the principle of verification as applied in its original form it would turn not only the statements of metaphysics as nonsensical but it would render universal generalizations, statements about the past and statements of natural science, equally nonsensical since none of the above said statements is ever conclusively verifiable. It is only the weak sense of the term that is required by his principal of verification.

Ayer draws another distinction between practical verifiability and verifiability in principle. It is not necessary for us to be able to actually verify a proposition, but it is necessary for us to know what observations would be relevant to its truth or falsity. As long as it is verifiable in principle it can be admitted into the realm of meaningful discourse. It may not be practically possible to verify a proposition about a distant galaxy, but it would in principle be possible. Such a proposition would be regarded as meaningful as we could say what observations would be relevant to its truth or falsity. It is just that we cannot make those observations.

According to the verification principle the sentences 'God's in his heaven' and grammatically similar sentence 'Smith's in his study', and the whole host of sentences by which propositions may be expressed can be seen that 'Smith's in his study' does express a proposition to the person who states or hears it, and 'God's in his heaven' does not. 'God's in his heaven' may have meaning in a sense; for example, it may express a feeling on the part of the person uttering the sentence. As such, it may be said to have emotive meaning for that sentence. As such, it may be sad to have emotive meaning for that person; but as he will not be able to verify what the sentence says, it cannot be called actually meaningful for him."⁸ The principle of verification shows that the utterances of the metaphysician are nonsensical does not follow simply from the fact that they are devoid of factual content and so utterances of theology also the language of moral and aesthetic. Ayer says that if philosophy is to be accounted a genuine branch of knowledge it must be defined in such a way as to distinguish it from metaphysics, he spoke of the metaphysician as a kind of misplaced poet. Ayer said that the greater part of metaphysics is merely the embodiment of humdrum errors, there remain a number of metaphysical passages which are the work of genuine mystical feeling; and they may more plausibly be held to have moral or aesthetic value.

Conclusion : Theory of meaning is a vast subject of philosophy which covers epistemological as well as metaphysical inquiries directly or indirectly. In this process philosophers have adopted one or the other method or theory for the effective solution of the problem of a meaning. Meaning is the central problem in the analytic philosophy. Clarification of meaning was the beginning of the genesis of analytic philosophy. This problem is primary pre-occupied in the works of analytic philosophers. The aim of analysis thus was to make every statement an adequate picture of the reality it referred to, and the language was the tool which could make the undertaking capable of complete realization. We cannot generalize this development as the development of philosophy. Analytic philosophy is not the development of philosophy rather it is development of a school of thought in western contemporary philosophy.

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