

## Chapter One

### Language as meaning

The language of friendship is not words but meanings.

#### The meaning of words

The most important fact about language is that it is a way of communicating meaning. If it did not do that, it would be as irrelevant to most of what human beings do as bird song or the sound of the waves. The latter forms of sound are often pleasing to human ears, but they do not help us to conduct our everyday business. Language does exactly that, and more. But from the fact that language communicates meaning it does not follow that it is easy to say what meaning is. There was a famous book by Ogden and Richards entitled *The Meaning of Meaning*, which listed over twenty definitions of the word, but in the end it did not succeed in resolving the problems of how to deal with the question of meaning.

Dictionaries are in the business of providing meanings for words but they struggle to provide a definition of meaning itself. *The American Heritage Dictionary* even includes a quotation from the philosopher Willard van Quine: ‘Pending a satisfactory explanation of the notion of meaning, linguists in the semantic field are in the situation of not knowing what they are talking about.’ Despite the absence of ‘a satisfactory explanation of the notion of meaning,’ the editors go ahead and provide meanings for almost 100,000 words.

The basic notion of a word was given by Ferdinand de Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics*. He proposed the model of a sign as linking two parts, the concept and what he called the **sound-image**. He provided the diagram shown in (1) to illustrate this notion.

(1)

The concept 'tree' is linked to the appropriate 'sound-image' in a language: in Latin *arbor*, in English *tree*, in French *arbre*, in German *Baum*, and so on. He labeled the

sound-

the

be used

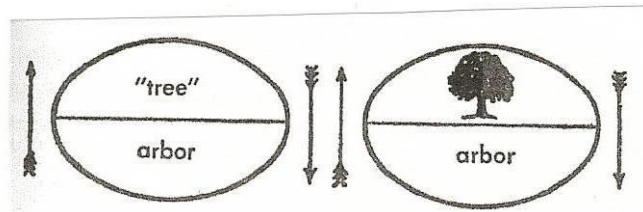


image the **signifier** and

concept the **signified**, two

expressions which came to

in a wide range of

discourses. The notion seems relatively easy to demonstrate with respect to nouns representing physical objects but it becomes more problematic with abstract concepts, and even more so with adjectives, verbs, and such grammatical words as prepositions. For example, what is the meaning of *of* in such expressions as *the head of the table*, *a cup of coffee*, *freedom of expression*?

Even with physical objects, cross-linguistic comparisons show that the notion of 'concept' is not a simple one. For example, the English word *river* corresponds to two separate words in French, *fleuve* referring to a river that flows into the sea, and *rivière* for one that flows into another river. On the other hand, the German word *Stuhl* covers both *chair* and *stool* in English. A more complex case can be seen in the range of color adjectives. The color spectrum is a continuum that is divided into different color words in different languages. Some languages make only two or three basic distinctions, whereas others, such as English, may have as many as eleven. Kinship terms also vary greatly from language to language. Danish speakers distinguish grandparents as *farfar* 'father's father,' *morfar* 'mother's father,' and so on. Where English speakers make do with a single expression *brother-in-law*, many societies make a number of distinctions in this

category of relationship. The entries in a dictionary generally give only the minimum information necessary to distinguish one word from another.

*'Dictionaries are like watches; the worst is better than none and the best cannot be expected to go quite true.'*

Samuel Johnson

In practice, we seldom bother to consult the dictionary about the meaning of most of the words that we use in speaking. We consult the dictionary only about technical or unfamiliar words when we are unsure of their meaning or in a legal dispute. The original dictionaries were simply lists of 'hard words' and designed mainly to help readers spell them correctly. Contemporary dictionaries mostly serve the same function, except for a few readers who are interested in the historical development of the language.

The dictionary maker's challenge is to provide just enough information to enable the reader to make sense of a text in which the word occurs. The dictionary cannot come close to providing all the meaning that the speaker has. (The Spanish Academy reportedly included in its definition of the word for a dog that it is the animal that raises one leg to urinate.) For example, the definitions of the word *house* do not include the information that it usually has four walls, at least one door and normally some windows, or that it may be divided into several rooms with different functions, e.g., kitchen, bathroom, bedroom. Nor does the definition include the information that for most young people to live in a house it is necessary to obtain a mortgage or pay rent to the owner. Yet these kinds of details are part of our everyday knowledge about houses. When we hear someone say *John and Mary are having difficulty finding a house*, we can immediately envisage a number of scenarios that would fit this statement, but we would not find this information through consulting a dictionary.

*'A definition is the enclosing a wilderness of ideas within a wall of words'*

Samuel Butler

The shortcomings of any dictionary are not important for our understanding of human language. The example of the word *house* simply illustrates that we know much more than can be summarized briefly in a dictionary entry. This should be obvious to everyone, but formal linguists (see Chapter Three) often employ lexical items in their models as if their meanings were equivalent to dictionary definitions. They have been able to do so because meaning plays a relatively minor (if any) role in their model. If, however, we are interested in how human beings communicate through language, the wider knowledge that speakers possess about the world is clearly relevant.

There are also what are known as **lexical gaps**, that is, where there is a concept for which we have no single word. For example, the word *bitch* (in its basic meaning) refers to a female dog, but there is no single word for 'male dog,' so speakers often resort to circumlocutions, such as, 'Is that a boy dog?' I used to ask my students to come up with new words for notions that have no single entry in the dictionary. They were often very ingenious in their suggestions.

#### **Some useful words that cannot be found in the dictionary**

*Brashlets* (noun) Those annoying pieces of paper that fall out by the dozens from magazines upon any human contact.

*Misticulate* (verb) To turn a wave into something different upon finding that you don't know that person over, after all.

*Prantle* (verb) The windmilling of one's arms in a vain attempt to avoid falling or losing one's balance.

*Strett* (verb) To push a crosswalk button repeatedly in hopes that doing so will cause the light to change more quickly.

*Scrimp* (verb) To clean one's room by shoving everything underneath.

*Meanderthal* (noun) An annoying individual moving slowly and aimlessly in front of another individual who is in a hurry.

Alas, I no longer have the names of the students to acknowledge them, but they have my thanks if they ever read this.

### **Meaning in context**

Some linguists would argue that the kind of commonsense knowledge that we bring to the example *John and Mary are having difficulty finding a house* is not part of language, but any speaker of contemporary British or American English would bring such awareness to the understanding of the utterance. It is not necessary to know who John and Mary are or where it is that they cannot find a house. It is, however, often the case that we cannot fully understand an utterance unless we know who said it, when, and possibly where. Charles Fillmore once gave as example of the need for contextual information the message found in a bottle that had floated up on a beach: *Meet me here tomorrow at the same time with a stick this big*. In order to know what this actually means one would have to know who *me* refers to, where *here* is, when it was said, so as to know when *tomorrow* is, at what time the message was written, and what size was indicated by the gesture *this big*. This kind of information is immediately available to the addressee who knows who is speaking, where, when, and can see the gesture, but the finder of the message in the bottle does not have this information. Words such as *I, you, here, now, yesterday, and next week* take part of their meaning from who is speaking,

where, and when. They are known as **deictic terms**, since they symbolically ‘point’ to aspects of the communication situation. However, we do not need this kind of information to understand the meaning of *John and Mary are having difficulty finding a house*.

#### Some deictic terms

I	you
here	there
come	go
bring	take
today	tomorrow
this	that

Many linguists and philosophers who study meaning tend to deal with isolated examples of written language, detached from any context. There are some aspects of meaning that can be studied under these conditions. For example, some words are classified as synonyms (having the same meaning), e.g. *hide* and *conceal*, though they are not always appropriate in the same context (e.g., *John hid in the bushes*). Other words are antonyms (having opposed meanings), e.g., *alive* and *dead*. The denial of one of these asserts the other, so that to say *Peter is not dead* is the same as saying that *Peter is alive*. There are other words that have opposing meanings that are not antonyms, e.g., *big* and *small*, because denying that something is big does not necessarily mean that it is small. There are also words in a reciprocal relationship, e.g., *father of/son of*, and *buy from/sell to*, so to say that *Peter is Henry’s son* is equivalent to saying *Henry is Peter’s father*, and if I *bought* something from you, you must have *sold* it to me. There are also verbs with an implied object even when it is not stated. For example, *John is reading* means that John is reading something, though it is not stated what it is. In contrast, *John is sleeping*

has no implied object. Other verbs may have an implied instrument, as *Peter kicked the ball*. It would be very odd to say *Peter kicked the ball with his foot*, unless mentioning which foot, as in *Peter kicked the ball with his left foot*. Properties of words such as these can be established from a general understanding of the language and do not require reference to particular contexts of use.

### **Meaning and logic**

*Logic and consistency are luxuries for the gods*

Samuel Butler

#### **a. Analytic vs. synthetic meanings**

Some scholars have explored the ways in which logical relationships are encoded in language. One is the syllogism: *All men are mortal; Socrates is a man; therefore Socrates is mortal*. However, since Plato's day few people conduct their conversations to illustrate such conclusions. Another aspect of meaning that has attracted the attention of philosophers is the notion of necessary truth in contrast to contingent truth. If I say *It is raining outside*, this statement is true if in fact it is raining outside and false otherwise. If, however, I say *All dogs are mammals*, it is not necessary for the hearer to examine any particular dog to find out whether this is true. It is part of the definition of the concept 'dog' that it is a mammal. Apparent counter-examples such as china dogs and toy dogs are not considered to affect the truth of the general statement that all dogs are mammals. Expressions that require reference to circumstances in the world are called **synthetic** while those that do not require such validation are **analytic**. Despite the attention they have received from philosophers and some linguists, analytic statements are not common

in social interaction, and consequently they are not central to an understanding of how people use language.

### **b. Entailment**

*'Life is the art of drawing sufficient conclusions from insufficient premises'*

Samuel Butler

Some linguists have also been interested in the logician's notion of entailment. This is the notion of what can be deduced from a statement. For example, if I say *I saw a coyote in the street today* and I am speaking accurately then it necessarily follows that I saw an animal. Thus the statement *I saw a coyote* entails 'I saw an animal' but the statement *I saw an animal* does not entail 'I saw a coyote' since there many other kinds of animals. Similarly, if I say *All the students passed the exam* this entails that some of the students passed the exam (since *all* includes *some*) but *Some of the students passed the exam* does not entail that all of the students passed the exam. The notion of entailment, however, is again of limited interest when looking at how people use language meaningfully, though many examples reveal the complex semantic content of words, as in the example of the coyote being an animal. If I say *I saw a man on the corner today*, this entails I saw something and that the something was an adult human being and also that the human being was male. These are essential features of the word *man*. If I say *I saw a box on the corner today*, it still entails that I saw something but that something is no longer human or male.

Given the importance of lexical items in recent accounts of syntax (see Chapter Three), the semantic features of words are of obvious importance. Entailment is, among other things, one way of identifying these features and determining the truth or falsity of an utterance. It is philosophers rather than linguists who are concerned (some might say



obsessed) with whether an expression is true or false. The nineteenth century German statesman Metternich is reputed to have said that one of the commonest uses of language was for the concealment of thought. This may be more true of diplomacy than in everyday uses of language but we all know that in many cases what we say is not 'the whole truth' and sometimes not even close to it.