

PHILOSOPHY OF
LANGUAGE

SCOTT SOAMES

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PHILOSOPHY
OF LANGUAGE

Scott Soames

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Acknowledgments

THE IDEA FOR THIS BOOK, as well as the series of which it is a part, was first expressed in the epilogue to volume 2 of *Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century*, when, voicing my belief that it is a mistake to look for one big, systematic, and unifying picture of philosophy in our era, I characterized what we need as “a collection of more focused pictures, each giving a view of the major developments of related lines of work, and each drawn with an eye to illuminating the larger lessons for work in neighboring subfields” (464). What follows is my own vision of where we have been, where we stand today, and where we are, or should be, going in the philosophy of language. The concrete proposal for the book, and the series, was presented to Ian Malcolm, the philosophy editor of the Princeton University Press, in the spring of 2006 at an APA conference in Portland, Oregon. Since then Ian has been a staunch backer of the project, who has cleared away obstacles and pushed it forward at every step. I couldn’t ask for a better editor and publisher. Nor could I ask for a better copyeditor than Princeton’s Jodi Beder, who, in addition to doing her normal excellent job, both alerted me to passages requiring clarification, and saved me from several philosophical errors. As for the book itself, I am grateful to Josh Dever and John Burgess for reading and commenting on drafts of specific chapters, and to Kent Bach, Jeff King, Jeff Speaks, and Eduardo Villanueva for reading, and providing extensive comments on, the entire manuscript. I have profited greatly from their help. Most of all, I want to thank my wife Martha for continuing to put up with me through this, as well as my many other, projects. Without her continuing support none of this would have come to fruition.

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Introduction

THIS BOOK FOCUSES on two main facets of the philosophy of language: its contribution to the development of a theoretical framework for studying language, and the investigation of foundational concepts—truth, reference, meaning, possibility, propositions, assertion, and implicature—that are needed for this investigation, and important for philosophy as a whole. Part 1 traces major milestones in the development of the theoretical framework for studying the semantic structure of language. Part 2 explores new ways of thinking about what meaning is, and how it is distinguished from aspects of language use.

Philosophy of language is, above all else, the midwife of the scientific study of language, and language use. By *language*, I mean both natural languages like English, and invented languages like those of logic and mathematics. By *language use* I mean its private use in thought, as well as its public use to communicate thoughts. The central fact about language is its representational character. Exceptional cases aside, a meaningful declarative sentence *S* represents the world as being a certain way. To sincerely accept, or assertively utter, *S* is to believe, or assert, that the world is the way *S* represents it to be. Since the representational contents of sentences depend on their grammatical structure and the representational contents of their parts, linguistic meaning is an interconnected system.

In studying it, we exploit the relationship between meaning and truth. For *S* to be meaningful is for it to represent the world as being a certain way, which is to impose conditions the world must satisfy, if it is to be the way *S* represents it. Since these are the truth conditions of *S*, being meaningful involves having truth conditions. Thus, the systematic study of meaning requires a framework for specifying the truth conditions of sentences on the basis of their syntactic structure, and the representational contents of their parts. This framework arose largely from the work of four philosopher-logicians. The first, Gottlob Frege, invented modern

symbolic logic, used it to analyze arithmetical concepts, and laid the basis for compositional theories of meaning, reference, and truth conditions. The second was Bertrand Russell, whose analyses of natural language extended Frege's contribution. The third was Alfred Tarski, who both developed theories that derive the truth conditions of all sentences of certain logical languages from specifications of the referents of their parts, and combined these with illuminating definitions of logical truth and consequence. The last, Rudolf Carnap, saw the implications of Tarski's work for the study of meaning, and helped lay the basis for extending it to modal systems. The result was a theoretical framework for the semantic investigation of grammatically simple, but expressively powerful, formal languages into which substantial fragments of natural languages could be translated.

Since Tarski's formal languages lacked key features of natural languages, including context-sensitivity and various forms of *intensionality*, further work was needed. Some constructions—e.g., those involving epistemic, counterfactual, or modal operators—are intensional in that their extensions, or truth values, aren't determined by the reference of their parts. These constructions point to dimensions of meaning beyond reference for subsentential constituents, and truth conditions for sentences, in the sense provided by Tarski. Sensitivity to this led to a recognition that the truth conditions assigned to sentences by his theories are too weak to determine their meanings. While some struggled to find ways around the problem, proponents of (*context-sensitive*) *intensional logic* showed how to alleviate (though not fully solve) it, by relativizing Tarski-style theories of truth to contexts of utterance and possible states of the world. This approach, widely known as *possible worlds semantics*, was pioneered by a second group of philosopher-logicians led by Saul Kripke, Richard Montague, David Lewis, Robert Stalnaker, and David Kaplan. In addition to providing truth conditions of a more robust sort, the approach expanded the languages amenable to Tarski's techniques to include those incorporating modal concepts expressed by 'necessary', 'possible', 'could', and 'would', temporal concepts expressed by natural-language tenses, and indexical notions expressed by worlds like 'I', 'he', and 'now'. With this enrichment of the framework for studying meaning, it became possible to imagine the day

in which natural languages would be treatable in something close to their entirety by descendants of the formal techniques initiated by Tarski. This story is told in part 1.

Part 2 takes up the most important conceptual challenges we face in advancing this agenda. First, two crucial aspects of the metaphysics of meaning—propositions and possible world-states—are investigated. After reviewing why propositions—needed as meanings of sentences and objects of the attitudes—can neither be extracted from theories of truth conditions, nor defined in terms of possible world-states, I explain why they also can't be the mysterious, inherently representational, abstract objects they have traditionally been taken to be. Instead of explaining the representationality of sentences and cognitive states in terms of their relations to the supposedly prior and independent representationality of propositions, we must explain the representationality of propositions in terms of the representationality of the cognitive states with which they are connected. Chapter 5 presents a new approach, constructed along these lines.

This approach is coupled with a conception of possible world-states as properties that specify what the world would be like if the sets of basic propositions with which they are defined were true. Other features of this conception include (i) the accommodation of metaphysically impossible, but epistemically possible, world-states, (ii) the inquiry-relativity of the spaces of states needed by our theories, (iii) an account of our apriori knowledge of world-states, and (iv) an explanation of why the actual world-state can be known either in the same manner as other world-states, or as it is empirically, and indexically, given to us. This, in turn, leads to the resolution of an apparent paradox involving apriori knowledge of the truth of aposteriori propositions at the actual world-state, and to the recognition that certain truths are, in principle, knowable apriori, even though some of their simple apriori consequences aren't.

Finally, I explore the relationship between theories of linguistic meaning and theories of language use. This problem—widely known as that of the “semantics-pragmatics interface”—is the focus of intense contemporary investigation. At issue is whether the traditional conception of the relationship between meaning and use can survive. According to that conception, the semantic

content of a sentence in context is always a proposition, which, special circumstances aside, is both asserted by utterances of the sentence in the context, and itself the source of whatever subsidiary assertions may result. Problems are posed for this conception, based on a wide variety of expressions, constructions, and uses of sentences. Solutions are sought by comparing semantic analyses defending the traditional account with those challenging it. In the end, I defend an emerging conception of the relationship between meaning and use, according to which the meaning of a sentence is a set of constraints on what normal uses of it assert, or express. When the sentence is syntactically complete, but semantically incomplete, its semantic content doesn't determine a complete, truth-evaluable thought or assertion, and so must be pragmatically supplemented. When its meaning does determine a complete proposition p , normal uses of it express thoughts, or result in assertions, the contents of which are proper pragmatic enrichments p^* of p . Whether or not p itself counts as asserted varies, depending on the relationship that holds between p , p^* , and the presuppositions of the context.

Despite once influential Quinean skepticism about meaning, today there are, I think, no serious grounds for doubting that words have meaning, that for each there are correct answers to the question "What does it mean?" and that two expressions are synonymous when the answer is the same for both. Much the same can be said of previously widespread skepticism about propositions, once one abandons outmoded views of what they are. However, there are serious questions about what parts of the information carried by uses of a sentence are included in its meaning, and what parts are not. The search for principles that will answer these questions by distinguishing aspects of meaning from aspects of use is inseparable from the task of formulating a conception of what meaning is that clarifies the content of the claim we make when we say that a piece of information is part of it. These are, in my opinion, the most urgent conceptual challenges confronting the philosophical, and scientific, study of language today. They are also the tasks to which the final chapter is devoted.

PART ONE

A Century of Work in the
Philosophy of Language

The Logical Study of Language

1.1 GOTTLLOB FREGE—ORIGINS OF THE MODERN ENTERPRISE

1.11 *Foundations of Philosophical Semantics*

Although philosophers have long speculated about language, it wasn't until the late nineteenth century that the philosophy of language emerged as a self-conscious and systematic area of study. Four publications by Gottlob Frege marked this emergence. Two of these—*Begriffsschrift (Concept-Script)* (1879) and *Grundgesetze der Arithmetik (The Basic Laws of Arithmetic)* (1893/1903)—focused on logic and the foundations of mathematics. Their aims were (i) to set out a formalized language and proof procedure sufficient for mathematics, and (ii) to derive arithmetic from the axioms of, and definitions available in, this system—and thereby to provide a logical basis for all of mathematics. Although the degree to which Frege achieved (ii) is a matter of continuing debate, the degree to which he achieved (i) is not. His systems were the starting points for the stunning development of mathematical logic in the twentieth century, and for the use of logical ideas and techniques in the study of natural languages.

Two further classics, “Function and Concept” (1891) and “On Sense and Reference” (1892a), made contributions to both. In the former, Frege uses the key notion of a function to develop the semantics of his logical language. He begins by refining the prevailing mathematical conception, clearly distinguishing functions from expressions that designate them. He then extends the notion to include functions designated by predicate expressions (the arguments of which are objects and the values of which are truth and falsity), functions designated by truth-functional connectives (which map truth values onto truth values), and functions designated by the quantifiers ‘for all $x \dots$ ’ and ‘for some $x \dots$ ’ (which map the functions designated by predicates and formulas

onto truth values). In the end, what we have is not just a calculus with a mechanical procedure for proving formulas the antecedent understanding of which is taken for granted, but also a set of concepts interpreting them. With this, Frege laid the groundwork for the systematic study of the relations between syntax and semantics, form and meaning, and proof and truth.

“On Sense and Reference” extends his approach in two ways. First, meaning and reference are distinguished, with compositional principles determining the meanings and referents of sentences, and other compound expressions, from the meanings and referents of their parts. Second, the ideas of logical semantics are applied to natural language. The resulting picture is one in which the central feature of language is how it represents the world. For a declarative sentence *S* to be meaningful is for it to represent the world as being a certain way, which is to impose conditions the world must satisfy, if it is to be the way *S* represents it. Since *S* is *true* iff (i.e., if and only if) the world is the way *S* represents it to be, these are the *truth conditions* of *S*. To sincerely accept, or assertively utter, *S* is (roughly) to believe, or assert, that these conditions are met. Thus, the systematic study of meaning requires the specification of the truth conditions of sentences on the basis of their syntactic structure, and the representational contents of their parts. Frege supplied the rudiments of such a specification.

1.12 *Frege’s Distinction between Sense and Reference*

Sentences represent the world because they are made up of words and phrases that stand for *objects, events, concepts, and properties*. Since meaning is representational, it may seem that what these expressions stand for (refer to) is what they mean. However, this leads to a problem, known as “Frege’s puzzle,” which led him to distinguish meaning from reference. The puzzle involves explaining why substitution of coreferential terms in a sentence sometimes changes meaning. For example, Frege took it to be obvious that the (a)/(b) sentences in (1–3) mean different things, even though they differ only in the substitution of coreferential terms.

- 1a. The author of *Life on the Mississippi* was the author of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*.
- b. The author of *Life on the Mississippi* was the author of *Life on the Mississippi*.
- 2a. Mark Twain was the author of *Life on the Mississippi*.
- b. Mark Twain was Mark Twain.
- 3a. Samuel Clemens was Mark Twain.
- b. Samuel Clemens was Samuel Clemens.

His contention is supported by three facts: (i) one can understand both sentences, and so know what they mean, without taking them to mean the same thing (or agree in truth value), (ii) one who assertively utters (a) would typically be deemed to say, or convey, more than one who assertively utters (b), and (iii) one would standardly use the (a) and (b) sentences in ascriptions, 'A believes that S', to report what one took to be different beliefs. If this is sufficient for the sentences to differ in meaning, then T1, T2, and T3 cannot jointly be maintained.

- T1. The meaning of a genuine referring expression (singular term) is its referent.
- T2. Both singular definite descriptions—i.e., expressions of the form *the F*—and ordinary proper names are genuine referring expressions.
- T3. The meaning of a sentence S (or other compound expression E) is a function of its grammatical structure plus the meanings of its parts; thus, substitution of expressions with the same meaning doesn't change the meaning of S (or E).

Frege rejects T1. For him, the meaning of a name is not its bearer, and the meaning of a definite description is not what it denotes. Instead, meaning determines reference. The meaning, or sense, of 'the largest city in California' is something like the property of being a California city larger than all others. Its referent is whatever has this property—Los Angeles. Although different terms with the same sense must have the same referent, terms with the same referents may have different senses, which explains