

Studies in Linguistics and Philosophy

Jeff Ross

The Semantics of Media

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THE SEMANTICS OF MEDIA

by

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1. MEDIA

1. LANGUAGE AND THE STUDY OF CONTENT

This book investigates the notion of semantic content from a certain philosophical angle, using particular philosophical instruments. The study of content is difficult, but it is not the difficulty of approaching some unfamiliar phenomenon that we lack the words to describe; the trouble is that there are many different ways of thinking about content which are deeply familiar to us, but which we are not at all used to analysing, comparing or even describing in the first place.

To compose a general theory of content, it is necessary to reflect on language. There are two quite different roles which the study of language can play in this enterprise, and both are of crucial importance.

First of all, we can take language as our paradigm bearer of content. Linguistic expressions, more accurately, typically possess a semantic content: it is called *meaning*. And the study of language, linguistics, is a fairly well-developed art. Therefore, one natural way to proceed is to attempt to extend the methods and concepts of linguistics beyond language to other 'things that have content'.

Linguistics traditionally divides into three branches which we can characterize very simply as follows.

The *syntax* of a language is concerned with compositional relations among its expressions: the ways in which complex expressions are built up from simpler expressions. Making reference to a system of syntactic categories, a structural description is assigned to all the well-formed expressions of the language, registering structural ambiguities and amounting finally to a characterization of the kind of structure which a grammatical sentence of the language must exhibit.

The *semantics* of a language is concerned with the meanings of its expressions. A central job is to show what happens to meanings under syntactic composition, and it is assumed that an important part, and quite possibly all, of what we understand meaning to be is bound by the *principle of compositionality*:

the meaning of a complex expression is determined by the meanings of its syntactic components.

The methodological significance of this principle is that it forces us, in giving the semantics of any expression, to say what contribution it makes to more complex expressions in which it occurs.

The *pragmatics* of a language is concerned with the contexts in which its expressions are produced. It makes reference to such standard contextual *roles* as speaker and addressee. A central job for pragmatics is to aid in explaining the semantics of those expressions whose meaning at some level varies according to context: deictic pronouns, for example. Pragmatics is also often taken to cover the *uses* to which expressions may be put, and the sorts of act which may be performed in producing them.

Pragmatics is the most imperfectly systematized of the three divisions, and is often seen as a complement zone which contains by default any material which is too hard to account for elsewhere; hence the phrase 'the pragmatic wastebasket'. In fact, the pragmatics of language is less like a basket where we throw things than a mad jungle where things seethe and shriek in their natural state; we should see as hard-won exceptions those cases in which we have managed to domesticate these jungle creatures, that is, to generalize from contextual features in the form of syntactic and semantic patterns. It is worth emphasizing this because when we go beyond language to other manifestations of content, we find our limitations in this direction to be even more acute.

The existence of a reasonably well-developed theory of natural language sets an obvious course for the broader study of content: to see how far the kinds of analysis which work for language will yield insight when applied more generally. This program has been officially pursued under the name of *semiotics* (*semiology* in Europe) throughout this century, beginning with suggestions by the American logician C.S. Pierce and the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure envisioned a science that studies the life of signs in society', of which linguistics would ultimately form only that branch concerning what is idiosyncratic to language beyond general semiotic principles (Saussure 1916). A discipline of semiotics has developed accordingly, attempting to investigate signs and systems of signs in ways parallel to the treatment of expressions and languages in linguistics.

The immediate question that arises is: which linguistics? There are many ways of studying language, and many of these are in competition. In principle this will yield a corresponding myriad theories of semiotics. Another core question is: what counts as a sign? Presumably, different theories of semiotics will isolate different spheres of influence, different realms of 'things with content' which are susceptible to their methods. Comparing potential systems of semiotics is not the aim here. But we can

realize right away that the features which characterize actual semiotics may have more to do with the particular strand of linguistics upon which it is historically based, than with what follows logically from the abstract program of extending linguistics.

It is natural that linguistics should serve as a guide for the broader study of content, that its findings should be generalized as far as they can be. Moreover, it is worth enshrining as a fundamental empirical constraint on any theory of 'content and its manifestations' that it must demonstrate what the content of linguistic expressions – their meanings – has in common with the content of the other items recognized by the theory. For whatever content and meaning – semantic properties – turn out to be on closer analysis, it is here that we find the similarities between these items by which we are encouraged to study them as a group. There should be a generalized semantics lying at the core of the semiotic enterprise.

But the sad fact is that semiotics as it has currently been developed is without such a semantic theory at its core. It presents a parade of intuitively-founded distinctions pertaining to the composition, content, and uses of all sorts of signs and sign systems, but no central theory of what content is. While I do not doubt that much of the taxonomy erected by semiotics is useful, it really amounts to a superstructure, which in effect *presupposes* that a reasonable semantic theory can be found.

My purpose in this book is to explore an alternative way of approaching the study of content, which reverses the picture, giving priority to semantics and largely presupposing the rest. Since I too make crucial use of linguistics in studying a range of content-bearing objects, my approach may also qualify as a kind of semiotics. But anyone who compares the present approach with works of current semiotics will see a very great difference in perspective.

The second way in which we can study content by reflecting on language is to investigate those linguistic constructions which we characteristically use to describe content. The meanings of these constructions are, of course, the legitimate concern of linguistic semantics in any case. But in addition, the focus on language about content acts as a sort of simplifying filter on the subject. The view of content which we arrive at in seeking to understand our description of it will not be the total view, and it will embody vagueness; but if it is really inherent to our language it cannot help being significant. In the rest of this book we shall explore this way of studying content. It is time to introduce the expressions which will serve as our guides.

2. THE NOTION OF MEDIA

Stories, paintings, photographs, films, plays, T.V. and radio shows, maps, pretending games, hallucinations, dreams. For all their diversity, the objects which belong to these categories share a certain semantic character – they are things which we typically describe in terms of their content. One way of describing them is by means of English sentences like the following:

In the story, a man invents a machine which enables him to travel backward and forward in time.

In the photograph, Ronald Reagan smiles goofily.

Norway is next to New Zealand on that map.

In 'The Purple Rose of Cairo', a character steps out of a movie into reality.

Washington bombed Belgrade on last night's news programme.

Marty built a house on Piccadilly in the Monopoly game.

The prepositions *in* and *on* have here a quite definite interpretation under which they relate objects to their content; with this interpretation in force, I call them *contentive prepositions*. And any object which can be sensibly described by means of them, I call a *medium*.

Notice that this departs from one common usage which applies the word *medium* to a kind or class of such objects. Thus we have 'the medium of cinema', having particular films as instances. In our terms, it is a particular story, programme, play, film, or dream which counts as a medium.

We have thus loosely characterized a range of objects in terms of the application of a certain linguistic construction. And most of what I have to say about media will be by way of providing a semantic analysis for *in-sentences* like those above, which it will be convenient to label *basic contentive sentences*. In Chapter Two we shall define a version of modal predicate logic which incorporates a set of operators whose semantics roughly corresponds to that of *in-m* phrases in English. Chapters Three, Four and Five deal with various difficulties which arise in taking the formulae of this simple language as analyses of English contentive sentences, and explore some elaborations that may help. And Chapter Six investigates a related class of sentences which describe interactions between users and characters. Our overarching aim is to give a fundamental account of a fundamental concept of content.

The rest of this chapter will try to shed some light on the neighbourhood of our enquiry. To begin with, let us briefly note some other important ways in which English speakers can describe the content of media. One way is by

means of another group of prepositions, which include *about*, *on* and *of*, as in:

- a story about a rogue
- a documentary on the Falklands crisis
- a portrait of the Queen

The most striking feature of these prepositions is that they use a nominal argument to describe content – rather than the sentential argument involved in the earlier sentences. They also form phrases which may modify verbs and adjectives, in a way that seems parallel to the behaviour of *that*-clauses. For a descriptive survey of the syntax and semantics of both sorts of media prepositions and their relation to *that*, see Ross (1983).

Another way is by means of explicit verbs like *represents*, *depicts*, *describes* and *portrays*.

- The painting depicts a young girl.
- The book describes the Zulu wars.
- The movie portrays Mozart as a fop.

(Notice that we can also speak of an artist or an author – in general, the *producer* of a medium – depicting or describing something).

Finally, a noun phrase which refers to a medium (a *media term*) will very often itself give some information about its content, as in:

- a suspense film
- a Greek tragedy
- a romance
- a nightmare

These are not the only ways in which English can describe media content, but they seem to be the most obvious and characteristic ones. Questions about what variations each of them encompasses and how they interrelate deserve detailed examination, which is beyond our scope. In what follows, the notion of ‘the content of media’ which I have in mind will always be whatever sort it is that corresponds to the *in*- and *on*- phrases, unless something is said to the contrary.

3. MEDIA AND ATTITUDES

Media are not the only things with content, and it is instructive to compare them with another linguistically-based classification of semantic objects – the propositional attitudes. The grammatical mark of an expression for an atti-

tude in English is that it can take a *that*-complement. *That*-clauses can attach to noun-, verb- or adjective-phrases, but it is verbs of propositional attitude which have traditionally been regarded as basic (at least in the philosophical literature). Thus we have:

Othello believes that Desdemona loves Cassio.

knows
deduces
desires
says
sees
remembers

as typical attitude sentences of English. Accordingly, we can speak of beliefs, (bits of) knowledge, desires, statements, perceptions, memories and so on as particular attitudes (though it may be quite unclear what kind of objects we have in mind, a point I will return to shortly). *That*-clauses can be seen as describing the content of propositional attitudes in much the same way that *in*-phrases describe the content of media. Both constructions involve a sentential argument, and in both cases logical equivalence is not in general a sufficient condition for its substitution (in the terminology of Cresswell (1985a), the content-argument is, in both cases, a *hyperintensional* context). In the end, the account we give of media sentences is largely analogous to the usual accounts of attitude sentences available within the same framework; no clear *semantic* difference between media and attitudes will emerge. We may note that the interesting case of dreams, which fits into both categories, seems to yield synonymous results:

- a) Joe dreamt that a cat talked.
- b) In Joe's dream, a cat talked.

The large question of whether attitude content and media content are fundamentally different is another matter beyond our scope. But I do want to remark on two straightforward and important non-semantic features of the attitudes.

First, propositional attitudes are associated with a fixed personal role – the role of *subject* of the attitudes. Where there is a belief, there must be a believer, whose belief it is. Similarly with the others in our list: it always makes sense to ask who the attitude belongs to. The built-in reference to a fixed personal subject is linguistically reflected in the fact that *that*-clauses combine so naturally with verbs, which require a *grammatical* subject. Another way of putting the point is to say that it is natural to regard the

attitudes as properties of persons (perhaps, à la Russell, as relations between persons and propositions). For it is reasonable to think that in general, what determines the content of a propositional attitude is the state or behaviour of its possessor.

The second point about attitudes is that we mostly have no access to, and rarely even think about, their internal structure. We don't know what beliefs or desires are made of, whether they have parts or not and, if they do, how they are combined or the combination interpreted. We talk about their content, but we assuredly do not compute this from the contents of recognized components: the attitudes in general have no relevant syntax.

An exception to this is the case of those attitudes which correspond to indirect discourse constructions, verbal attitudes such as statements. Clearly, the content of a statement that the Earth is round is significantly determined by the expressions that compose it. If, speaking in English, Harry had produced the sequence *my eyeball is round*, the content of his statement would *ipso facto* have been otherwise. This dependence of content on visible structure shows us precisely what is missing in the general case.

Let us now carry these observations across to the realm of media. In the first place, there is no clear and general analogue for media of the fixed subject role for attitudes. If we speak of Joe's film, what is the role we are assigning to Joe? Author? Producer? Director? Owner? Possibly any of these. What's more, there is another role which seems in some way analogous to that of subject of an attitude: that of the *viewer*, which does not seem to entail possession in any literal sense. Films are especially complicated media, but even in simpler cases it should be clear that media cannot be regarded as uniformly personal properties in the way that attitudes can, although they generally do involve people at many different points. (Again, there are exceptions: dreams and hallucinations seem essentially like attitudes in both of the respects we are considering.) The personal roles associated with media do of course play a very important part in their interpretation – producers' intentions and consumers' conventions, for example, largely determine the contexts with respect to which interpretation always takes place. But the diverse personal roles associated with media cannot be codified in a general form comparable to the notion of subject of attitudes.

As to the second point, we have far better access to the internal structure of media than we do to that of attitudes, and particular categories of media are associated with their own structural vocabularies. We can discuss the composition of stories in terms of chapters, paragraphs, lines, sentences, and words; of films in terms of scenes, shots, soundtrack, frames; of comic strips in terms of frames, captions and Ben Day dots; down through a dizzying

mealstrom of empirical detail. We know a great deal about the composition of media because to a large extent, we consciously compose them. And mostly it is by purposefully composing media in certain ways that we cause them to have the content that they do have.

4. THE MECHANICS OF MEDIA

Our hypothesis is that media are more or less alike in their possession of content: that is why a uniform preposition like *in* exists. But media differ enormously in their non-semantic properties, those properties based upon their internal structure or external context. Shouldn't something be said about this structural diversity?

It is a truism that the content that particular media have is a product of their internal structure together with their pragmatic organization. There is some kind of dependence upon structure in every case. But it is possible to discuss content without discussing its causes. This book is not concerned with what gives a medium its content. Most definitely, I will not be attempting any sort of compositional semantics for media. Nor is this book concerned with questions of categorization. (Insofar as categorization underlies componential structure, this is really the same area). In this, our approach to media differs from the standard approach to linguistic semantics which we discussed in §1. It also differs from semiotic studies of media which are modelled very closely on descriptive linguistics, which normally involve a desire to present generalisations of a syntactic or pragmatic nature.

However, it is important to leave space for such information. So I will assume that any actual medium is associated with a *pragmatic profile*, which details its relevant pragmatic, structural and categorial features in a perfectly general way. The pragmatic profile of a given novel will say something about the author and his intentions; the conventions of its readership; the language in which it is written; its division into chapters, paragraphs, sentences, illustrations; plus, if it is published, some abstract account of what publishing consists of, and the particular publishing history of this work; something about the distinction between novels, copies of novels, versions of novels; and so on. The pragmatic profile of a given film will similarly deal with its internal and pragmatic structure, uses, categories, contexts of production and consumption.

Media are objects with a structural and a semantic dimension (descriptions using *part of*, and its elaborations versus those using *contentive in* and its elaborations). My concern is with their content, and there will be plenty of problems in that area to occupy us. As to questions about how content is