

In defence of a code: Linguistic meaning and propositionality in verbal communication[☆]

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Abstract

Linguistic encoding is seen as playing a necessary but not solely sufficient role in speaker meaning by philosophers of Ordinary Language, such as Grice and Strawson. Despite well-rehearsed problems with some of Grice's and Strawson's specific theories, this general model has much to recommend it to present day linguistics. Recent accounts have tended either overtly to deny the existence of a code, such as those offered within the framework of integrationism, or radically to limit its contribution to speaker meaning. Accounts of this latter type tend to dwell on the fact that the linguistic code cannot explain all aspects of the meaning of an utterance in context, and therefore to deny that encoded meaning can be propositional. Defining a proposition as a set of conditions for truth, however, it is possible to maintain that encoded meaning determines a proposition, expressed by a sentence, which is complete in itself, but radically underspecified with respect to the proposition expressed by any utterance of that sentence in context. Such an approach can offer a way of addressing the rather ambiguous place afforded to the linguistic code in Levinson's account of pragmatic intrusion, and Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory. © 2001 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Ordinary language philosophy and theories of meaning

In 1956, Paul Grice and Peter Strawson published 'In defense of a dogma', a response to an earlier article by Quine (Quine, 1953). The dogma in question was the belief in the viability of a distinction between analytic and synthetic sentences, or between sentences which are necessarily true because of their intrinsic semantic properties, and sentences which may be either true or false, depending on external, contextual factors. The present paper considers how, in defending this dogma, Grice and Strawson were drawing on their commitment to a system of relatively stable relationships between linguistic expressions and meanings: to what has sometimes been described as a 'code' model of meaning. It argues that this model still has much to recommend it in current debates about meaning, although some recent linguistic theories have tended either to deny its plausibility or at least to play down the role and significance of the code.

Quine's rejection of the analytic/synthetic distinction followed from his scepticism towards linguistic meaning. Linguistic expressions could be used to refer to objects, but it was simply not necessary to posit a notion of 'meaning' to explain this; "meanings themselves, as obscure intermediary entities, may well be abandoned" (1953: 22). Quine's exclusively extensionalist approach to semantics therefore ruled out the possibility of distinguishing between necessary and contingent truths (to use Quine's own examples, sentences such as 'No bachelor is married', and those such as 'Brutus killed Caesar'). If linguistic expressions cannot be said to have meanings, beyond the individual entities they are used to refer to, no amount of linguistic analysis can determine truth-value; the distinction therefore becomes vacuous. Instead, speakers must be said to classify both sentences as 'true' for exactly the same reason; experience of the world has led to their being accepted as true. Sentences such as Quine's two examples, then, differ not in kind, but only in the degree of speakers' commitment to belief in them.

Grice and Strawson defend the idea that sentences traditionally classified as 'analytic' and 'synthetic' are in fact different in kind. In so doing, they appeal to the way in which these labels have traditionally been applied. The established philosophical usage of the terms, and the consensus over their applicability to new, as well as to familiar examples, both argue that there must be some genuine distinction which they describe. Furthermore, this argument can be supported with reference to 'everyday', as well as exclusively 'philosophical' terminology. Grice and Strawson consider the expressions 'means the same as' and 'does not mean the same as'. According to Quine's account, these expressions should be applicable only in relation to extensional equivalence. They could be used to describe whether or not two linguistic expressions pick out the same entity, or group of entities; they could not be used to distinguish between different ways of labelling the same phenomenon, a distinction which would rely on exactly the 'intermediate' notion of meaning which Quine rules inadmissible. Yet, Grice and Strawson argue, people do frequently use the two expressions in just this way. It seems perfectly natural to remark "that 'bachelor' means the same as 'unmarried man' but that 'creature with kidneys' does not mean the same as 'creature with a heart'" (1956: 200), even though both pairs

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