1 Chapter 2: Meaning and Definition

1.1 The Complexity of Language

This chapter is concerned with the meaning of language. It is important to recognize the difference between written and spoken language. Spoken language introduces many additional layers of meaning to that which is present in the actual words spoken. A very good example of this is the sentence ‘You shouldn’t steal library books’; with different emphasis placed on each word the meaning of the sentence changes, as in the following two sentences:

- You shouldn’t steal library books (implying that it may be acceptable for others to do so)
- You shouldn’t steal library books (implying that something like defacing them might be acceptable)

Since we will only be concerned with the meaning of written language we can ignore the subtleties of speech but you should remember that there are differences.

1.2 The Meaning of Language

Now we turn to the consideration of the nature of meaning. We will briefly look at three theories of meaning. The first two are common sense views which have serious difficulties.

Reference Theory: The reference theory of meaning, which traces back to Aristotle, considers the meaning of a word to be that which the word refers to, i.e. the extension (or reference class) of the word. For instance the word cat refers to all the cats in the world, and the word book to all the books. Problems with this theory are:

1. that we can understand the meaning of the word book with only partial experience of all the books, which is puzzling if the meaning of book is all the books;
2. many words such as unless, the and if don’t have a reference class;
3. we can understand phrases like the oldest person in the world without knowing the referent.

Idea Theory: The idea theory of meaning, which comes from John Locke, holds that the meaning of a word consists of the idea or mental image associated with that word. This theory seems to deal with the first and last problems for the reference theory, but this theory has problems as well:

1. there is no mental image associated with certain words, such as unless and if;
2. on reflection, this theory fails to deal with problem 1. of the reference theory—when we hold an image of a dog in our minds it has certain characteristics, such as long-haired or black, but certain dogs do not have these characteristics. Since we clearly cannot have an idea of a dog that fits all cases, i.e. one that is black and not black, short-haired and long-haired, how can the idea be the meaning:
3. we can never understand what someone else means by a given word since we do not have access to their ideas. The clearest cases of this are so-called simple properties such as color, taste and smell. We cannot describe the meaning of the word red by using other words.

Since the problems with these theories make them untenable, they have been rejected. A more reliable theory, that we will use in this course, is the following:

**Use Theory:** The use theory, developed by Ludwig Wittgenstein and John Austin, shifts the semantic burden from words to sentences, i.e. it is only in the context of a sentence that a given word takes on a definite meaning. This explains how the same word may have many distinct meanings, such as:

- She is a *green* lawyer. (*i.e.* inexperienced)
- He is looking *green*. (*i.e.* nauseated)
- We had a *green* winter last year. (*i.e.* no snow)

Now, since the meaning of words is determined by their use in a sentence, then how do we determine the meaning of sentences? The meaning of sentences is determined by their use in some context. To determine what a given sentence means we examine how the speaker (or writer) is using it in a given context. For instance, the sentence *Let me go* has very different meaning when uttered by a person whose arm has been grabbed as compared to when it is uttered by a child who wants permission to see a movie.

In this course, following the use theory, we will examine the context of use in order to determine the intended meaning of a sentence.

### 1.3 The Main functions of Language

Now we’ll review the main purposes for which language is used:

**Descriptive:** to describe factual information, *e.g.*, 

I don’t have any change for the coffee machine.

**Evaluative:** to make a value judgement, *e.g.*, 

The theory of evolution provides the best account of the origin of biological species.

**Emotive:** to express emotion, *e.g.*, 

I shall die of unrequited love.

**Evocative:** to evoke an emotional response in an audience, *e.g.*, 

At Speedy you’re a Somebody.

**Persuasive:** to persuade someone to accept something, as in an argument, or to act in a certain way, *e.g.*, 

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You shouldn’t take astrology seriously. There is no scientific basis for it.

**Interrogative:** to elicit information, *e.g.*, 

I won’t lend you any money unless you explain why you need it.

**Directive:** to tell someone to do something, *e.g.*, 

Take these pills twice a day.

**Performative:** an utterance that constitutes an action, *e.g.*, 

I now pronounce you husband and wife, 

when uttered in the right circumstances.

**Recreational:** when language is used for fun or enjoyment, such as in the telling of a joke.

1.4 Questions for Discussion: §2.5 (pp. 47-48 in Hughes)

Suggest additional contextual detail that would support attributing at least two plausible purposes to the speakers.

1. Why can’t you pay attention? (Said by a Grade 6 teacher to a student who frequently daydreams.)

2. The next car I buy will definitely be a Volvo. (Said by someone in a TV ad for Volvo.)

3. Frankly, Scarlett, I don’t give a damn. (Said by Clark Gable in the film *Gone With the Wind*.)

4. Like, wow, man, what a blast. (Said by a teenager after a rock concert.)

5. Your time is now up. (Said by a teacher at the end of an examination.)

6. I have often wondered what became of him. (Said by a middle-aged woman about a childhood friend.)

1.5 Definition

Whenever language is used it is clearly necessary to understand how certain words are being used. This is especially important in producing and analyzing arguments and in philosophical (or any other kind of) debate. The use of a word can be specified by supplying a definition for the word. We will only be concerned with giving definitions for words that have extensions (or reference classes). To understand how such definitions work it is important to make the distinction, made by Gottlob Frege, between the **sense** of a term (also known as *connotation* or *intension*) and its **reference** (or *denotation* or *extension*).

**sense:** what we understand when we understand the meaning of a word, *e.g.*, in the case of the word *bachelor*, the sense is the concept of an unmarried male.

**reference:** the class of objects that a word refers to, *e.g.*, in the case of the word *bachelor*, the reference is the class of all bachelors in the universe who exist, have existed and may exist in the future.
1.6 The Purposes of Definition

There are three main purposes for which definitions are put forward, which I will review here.

**Reportive Definitions:** This use of definitions is concerned with providing the information required to use a word correctly. This consists in providing a report of how this word is standardly used by a population—reportive definitions reflect standard usage. This is the kind of definition that dictionaries provide. Such definitions change over time as the way that the population uses language changes.

**Stipulative Definitions:** This use of definitions is concerned with stipulating the definition of a word for some specific purpose. This is often done, e.g., in technical writing, legislation and for the purposes of an argument or discussion. In this case the definition of a word that already has a definition need not be the standard one. This is often the way that new words are given meanings. Examples of stipulative definition are:

- A googol is $10^{100}$.
- A googolplex is 1 with a googol zeros after it, i.e. $10^{10^{100}}$.

**Essentialist Definition:** This use of definitions is an attempt to describe the essence of some thing, which cannot be stipulated and may not reflect the standard usage. This use of definition applies to words such as *justice, truth, love, peace* and *science*. Essentialist definitions should be understood as compressed theories, since the definition is really a theory of what the essence of the thing consists in.

There are also other categories that may cross the boundaries of these ones:

**Precising:** The use of a definition in order to eliminate ambiguity in a term, e.g.,

- A meter is one ten millionth the distance from equator to pole. (somewhat vague)
- A meter is the distance light travels in one 299,792,458th of a second. (more precise)

This can be done for reportive, stipulative or essentialist purposes.

**Persuasive:** The use of a definition to influence a person’s reaction to what is defined, e.g.,

- A vegetarian is someone who abhors the needless slaughtering of animals for our over-consumption.

This can be done for reportive (in some restricted sense, i.e. ‘standard usage’ in a restricted context), stipulative or essentialist purposes.

1.7 Methods of Definition

We will now review the main methods used to define words:

**Genus-Species:** A word is defined by referring to a class (i.e., a genus) of which the term is a member and to specify how it differs from other members of that class (i.e., the other species), e.g.,
A sea-plane is an airplane that is adapted for landing on and taking off from a body of water.

**Ostensive:** A word is defined by giving examples by pointing to particular things, *e.g.*, That [pointing to an animal] is a Baboon.

**Denotative:** A word is defined by naming a set of familiar exemplars, *e.g.*, Pets are animals like cats, dogs, snakes and pigs.

**Synonymous:** A word is defined by giving a synonym, *e.g.*, Effulgent means the same as radiant.

**Contextual:** A word is defined by using the word in a standard context and providing a different sentence that does not use the word but has the same meaning, *e.g.*, the term logical strength can be defined as follows:

This argument has logical strength means the same as The premises of this argument, if true, provide a justification for believing that its conclusion is true.

**Operational:** A word is defined very precisely in a way that specifies exactly when the word can be applied and when it cannot, *e.g.*, A genius is anyone who scores over 140 on a standard I.Q. test.

### 1.8 Assessing Reportive Definitions

A good reportive definition of a word is one that tells us what others mean when they use it and what others will understand us to mean when we use it. We will look at some of the ways that reportive definitions can fail to be good definitions:

**Too Broad:** A definition is too broad when the defining phrase applies to some things that are not in the extension of the term being defined, *e.g.*, Soccer is a game played with a ball.

**Too Narrow:** A definition is too narrow when the defining phrase does not apply to some things that are in the extension of the term being defined, *e.g.*, A school is an institution that aims at teaching children how to read and write.

**Too Broad and Too Narrow:** A definition is both too broad and too narrow if it excludes members of the extension and include others that are not in the extension, *e.g.*, A pen is an instrument designed for writing words.

**Circular:** A circular definition is one that defines a term by using the term defined. This can be precisely the same term as in,

Golf ball is a small spherical object used in the game of golf,
or a cognate (word with the same root) of the term being defined as in,

A surgeon is someone who practices surgery.

**Obscure:** A term that does not clearly express the meaning of the term being defined through the use of vague, obscure or metaphorical language, e.g.,

- A marathon is a long foot-race. (The term *long* makes this vague.)
- A fact is anything that rubs the corners off our prejudices. (The metaphorical phrase *rubs the corners off* makes this definition uninformative.)

### 1.9 Assessing Stipulative and Essentialist Definitions

A good stipulative definition is one that fixes a precise meaning of a term in a way that will be useful for some specific purpose. A good essentialist definition is one that reflects a true or reasonable theory about the essential nature of the phenomenon to which the term refers. In either case the definition should be clear enough so that it can be properly applied, so such definitions should not be obscure or circular. For instance, we may criticize the stipulative definition of an offensive weapon as

> anything that can be used to inflict harm on another person

for being vague, and we could criticize the essentialist definition

> love is essentially a mutual loving dependency between two people

for being circular.

Other problems arise when the term already has a reportive definition, which will always be the case for essentialist definitions. One problem is when a definition differs greatly from the reportive definition, in which case confusion may result. In such a case it should be made clear that a different definition is being used. In other cases certain stipulative or essentialist definitions may be broader or narrower than the reported one, which, though is not in and of itself a problem, may become problematic if this broader or narrower definition has undesirable consequences.

### 1.10 Questions for Discussion: §2.13 (pp. 62-63 in Hughes)

Comment on the following definitions:

1. A psychological disorder is any personal way of perceiving or interpreting events which is used repeatedly in spite of its consistent failure.

2. The term suicide is applied to all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce death.

3. No person is criminally responsible for an act committed or an omission made while suffering from a mental disorder that rendered the person incapable of appreciating the nature and quality of the act or omission or of knowing that is was wrong (from the *Criminal Code of Canada*).

4. Liberty is the right to do whatever the law permits.