Horwich's use theory of meaning

PHIL 93914
Jeff Speaks

April 10, 2008

1 Some initial problems for a use theory of meaning

Suppose that we want to explain the meanings of words in terms of their use by members of the relevant community. This project faces a number of difficult questions right from the start:

- Is it the actual uses of the word by speakers of the language, or possible uses of the word? The former seems far too narrow, as Kripke's discussion of the 'past behavior' response to the rule-following paradox shows. But the latter seems far too wide; there are possible worlds in which words have different meanings than they actually do, and surely the use of the words in those worlds should not be relevant to their actual meaning.
- How do we explain incorrect uses of the word? Will these — as in the simple dispositional response to the rule-following paradox — lead to the unacceptable result that dispositions to make mistakes are really dispositions to correctly apply a term with a disjunctive meaning?
- What is 'use'? Is it merely a bunch of physical events of sounds being emitted from the mouths of speakers, for instance? In this case, it is hard to see how we could analyze meaning in terms of such events. Or is it using words with certain intentions — in which case the use theory of meaning seems just to be the Gricean theory under a different title?
- Grice's distinction between what words mean and what speakers use them to mean on various occasions shows that there is no easy way to get from use to meaning — the fact that I use 'You are the cream in my coffee' in Grice's way does not mean that the phrase 'cream on my coffee' is ambiguous.
- If we analyze the meaning of a word in terms of dispositions of a number of different speakers to use the word, how do we delimit the relevant linguistic community without, circularly, counting a speaker as relevant iff they speak a language with a semantics of a certain sort?

2 Horwich on acceptance conditions

Horwich focuses on the conditions under which we accept certain sentences; his core idea is that our acceptance of sentences is governed by certain laws, and in the case of non-ambiguous expressions there is a single 'acceptance regularity' which explains all of our uses of the expression.

Some examples of such words, paired with the use-governing laws that Horwich thinks determine their meaning, along with a name for the type of law they exemplify.

red	We are disposed to accept 'that is red' in response to the sort of visual experience normally provoked by a red surface.	perceptual
true	We are disposed to provisionally accept every instance of the schema "p' is true iff p'	sentential
and	We are disposed to accept the two-way argument schema "p, q // p & q'	inferential
water	We accept 'x is water iff x has the underlying nature of the stuff in our seas, rivers, etc.'	natural kind

This way of explaining the meanings of expressions is compatible with either mentalism or its denial.

3 Some objections to Horwich's view

1. *What makes it the case that our use of the '+' sign is governed by the law that we accept instances of 'x+y=z' iff 'z' stands for the sum of x and y, rather than the corresponding 'quum' law?*

2. *What if someone is an error theorist about color? Then their use of 'red' won't be subject to the above acceptance law; but they surely mean the same thing by the word as we do.*

   Horwich suggests that they would accept a conditional acceptance law: if there are red things, then ...

   What if they thought not just that there are no red things, but that there couldn't be?

3. *How can this view be extended to proper names?*

   There's no obvious way to do it that I can see. You might treat names as perceptual terms, and while this would work for some cases, it would not work for most. And there's no obvious way to adopt the sentential, inferential, and natural kind models to the task.

4. *Can't someone use 'water' with its normal meaning without ever thinking about the underlying nature of the stuff in seas, rivers, etc? Couldn't he, for example, just think of water as a refreshing bottled beverage?*

   Yes, it seems so. We have to make special exceptions on this sort of theory for 'deferential' users of words, We might say the same about blind people and 'red', or

scientifically unsophisticated people and 'electron.' Such users of a word don't have all their uses of the name explained by some basic acceptance property, but rather defer in their use to those whose uses of name are explained by the relevant basic acceptance property.

This raises an important question: what is it to 'defer in your use' of some term t? Some possibilities:

- You take something to be in the extension of t iff someone to whom you intend to defer tells you it is. *But (i) you could presumably think that the experts were mostly wrong, and (ii) there could be no surviving experts, but you might still have views about what things are in the extension of* t.
- You intend to use t with the same meaning as some class of users of the term to whom you intend to defer. *But (i) you do this with every term, not just those you use deferentially, and (ii) typically it is not sufficient for you to use a word of, say, German with its usual meaning that you intend to use it with the same meaning as native German speakers. Intentions of this sort don't buy you competence.*
- *What else could 'deference' be?*

4 Term introduction and transmission

Kripke's view of reference in *Naming and Necessity*: a central feature of the account is that we do not analyze directly what it is for a term to have a given reference at t. Rather, we explain what it is to introduce a name with a given reference (initial baptism), and explain what it is for the term to maintain this reference over time (speakers intend to use the name with the same reference as those from whom they acquired the name).

Let's suppose that Kripke's view about the reference of names is broadly correct. It seems that this should have consequences for the correct view about the foundations of the meanings of names. In general, if there were not a distinction between the facts in virtue of which a name was introduced with a given meaning and the facts in virtue of which it maintains that meaning, we would not need that distinction at the level of reference, since meaning determines reference.

Given this, we can identify a common feature of the intention-based, belief-based, and use-theoretic accounts of meaning we have discussed so far: all try to analyze the meaning of a term at t in terms of properties which some class of language users have at t. What we have just argued is that, if Kripke's view of the reference of names is correct, this assumption about the meanings of names is incorrect.

Can we say something similar about linguistic expressions other than names? It seems so. Here's a quick argument: any linguistic expression can be such that someone uses it with its normal meaning without satisfying the conditions placed on use of the expression by Horwich's use theory. But such a person could persist in using it with its normal meaning even if everyone who did satisfy Horwich's conditions — and hence everyone to whom he might defer — ceased to exist.

One suggestion is that Horwich's theory serves better as a model for term introduction than as a general analysis of meaning at a time.

Can we think of meaning in general as governed by Kripke's model of initial baptism + transmission? It looks like the conditions for meaning change will be different for different sorts of words; arguably, names and kind terms are more resistant to meaning change than other sorts of expressions. But his does not mean that the model is inapplicable to other sorts of expressions.

A trouble case for this kind of view: Evans' example of 'Madagascar.'