

Lewis on conventions and meaning

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Lewis (1975) takes the conventions in terms of which meaning can be analyzed to be conventions of truthfulness and trust in a language. His account may be adapted to state an analysis of a sentence having a given meaning in a population as follows:

x means p in a population $G \equiv_{df}$

- (1a) ordinarily, if a member of G utters x , the speaker believes p ,
- (1b) ordinarily, if a member of G hears an utterance of x , he comes to believe p , unless he already believed this,
- (2) members of G believe that (1a) and (1b) are true,
- (3) the expectation that (1a) and (1b) will continue to be true gives members of G a good reason to continue to utter x only if they believe p , and to expect the same of other members of G ,
- (4) there is among the members of G a general preference for people to continue to conform to regularities (1a) and (1b)
- (5) there is an alternative regularity to (1a) and (1b) which is such that its being generally conformed to by some members of G would give other speakers reason to conform to it
- (6) all of these facts are mutually known by members of G

Some objections:

- Clause (5) should be dropped, because, as Burge (1975) argued, this clause makes Lewis's conditions on linguistic meaning too strong. Burge pointed out that (5) need not be mutually known by speakers for them to speak a meaningful language. Consider, for example, the case in which speakers believe that there is no possible language other than their own, and hence that there is no alternative regularity to (1a) and (1b). They might, for example, have encountered no other groups of people speaking different languages, and may believe that their language was handed down to them directly by God. But surely the fact that they have false beliefs about the origin and status of their language does not stop the expressions of their language from having meaning.
- Hawthorne (1990) objects that most sentences of English are too long ever to be uttered, and that Lewis' account does not apply to these. For consider two languages, which diverge only beyond the point where sentences get too long for me to

use them. Do I have a general preference that people conform to the regularity corresponding to one of the languages, rather than the other? It seems not, since there would be no difference in any of their utterances, or beliefs. Lewis (1992) replies that we can extrapolate from the used fragment of the language to the un-used fragment.

- There are sentences which are never, or almost never, used seriously. “You are the cream in my coffee.” Possible fix: delimit a class of serious utterances, and give an account of the meanings of sentences usually used in serious utterances in the above way. Then (somehow) move from an account of these sentences to an account of word meaning, and from there go back to take care of sentences like “You are the cream in my coffee.” Similar problems arise, as O’Leary-Hawthorne (1993) notes, with sentences which we can’t imagine someone having good evidence for, such as ‘The number of trees in Canada is odd.’ If someone uttered this, we would not raise our degree of belief in the relevant proposition.
- Consider now the problem I raised against the Ramseyan account: that there are propositions p , q such that anyone who believes p must believe q , but which are not such that any sentence which means p must also mean q . Do examples of such propositions pose a problem for Lewis’ analysis? It seems that they will so long as (to satisfy (6)) speakers know the relevant facts about the relationships between utterances and beliefs. But they might well know these facts.

In one sense, the claim that language is conventional is, as Lewis says, “a platitude — something only a philosopher would dream of denying.” (Lewis (1975), 166) It is a platitude that the words of our language could have had different meanings, and that they owe their meanings largely to the use to which we put them. But the claim that language is conventional, when this is taken as the claim that facts about the meanings of expressions in our language are derived from the mutual knowledge of speakers concerning what members of a population mean or would mean by their utterances (or what they believe or would believe when making or hearing utterances), is not platitudinous.

References

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