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Mélanges de linguistique
offerts à
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Les Presses d'ALFA (α)

1997

On the Notion of Potential Meaning

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"All science is the search for unity in hidden likenesses."
Bronowski (1972:13)

One of the few principles accepted by practically all scholars working in the field of semantics is that the sign is arbitrary. That is, it is commonly held that a physical sign has no inherent characteristic predisposing it to signify a particular mental significate, and conversely, that nothing in the meaning predetermines the particular marker or form which calls it to mind. The specific relation between the mental and physical parts of a given linguistic unit [note 1] is not, therefore, one which our intelligence can grasp and build on. We cannot, for example, simply on the basis of hearing an unfamiliar word, discern or even hypothesize its meaning. Some prior knowledge of a word is thus indispensable for us as listeners to get from its physical sign to its mental significate in order to understand it when it is spoken or written [note 2]. By the same token, for speakers to get from meaning to sign in order to use a word in speech or writing this prior knowledge is no less indispensable.

The principle of the arbitrariness of the sign is, therefore, of considerable importance when language is regarded as a means of communication. It has led a number of scholars to the conclusion that a sign must be linked to a fixed meaning known to both speaker and listener for communication to take place. Stern (1931:85) for example maintains:

There is no getting away from the fact that single words *have* more or less permanent meanings, that they actually do refer to certain referents, and not to others, and that this characteristic is the indispensable basis of all communication.... It is on this basis that the speaker selects his words, and the hearer understands them.

For this reason, language is often spoken of as a code, because what characterizes a code is an arbitrary, one to one relationship between sign and what is signified. It is also pointed out that it is the stability of the sign/meaning relationship which makes dictionaries possible. Perhaps the best known way of depicting this view of the word is Saussure's diagram (1955:99), reproduced here in Figure 1.

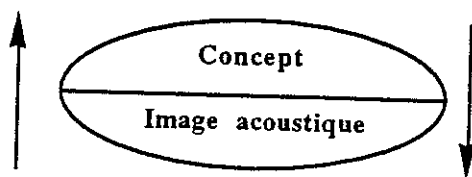


Figure 1

This manner of viewing language, and more particularly words, based as it is on the arbitrariness of the sign and the fact of communication, thus appears to be inescapable. If this were the whole story, the study of semantics would be relatively simple since it would in fact amount to little more than observing and describing first the sign and then the meaning of each significant item. But this is not the whole story, and when we take

into account other facts the situation becomes surprisingly complex, so complex in fact that what we have just considered to be inescapable has actually been called into question and even denied.

What complicates matters is that in actual usage significant items do not have a permanent, fixed, stable meaning. Words express different senses in different uses. When observed in different contexts, words turn out to be polysemous, as a glance at any dictionary showing the different senses of a word will show. This is why attempts to mechanize translation on the one sign/one meaning postulate have come to grief. In another passage Stern (1931:40) himself maintains that the meaning expressed varies with the speaker's apprehension of the referent:

It is further evident that when the word *camera* is used of different cameras, the meaning changes in correlation to the change of referent.... I conclude that the meaning of a word is determined by the characteristics of the referent, which is thus a necessary factor in the *differentia specifica* of meaning.

For Saussure (1955:152) each use involves a new articulatory and mental act giving rise to a varying sound and sense in usage, a fact which poses the problem of what constitutes the permanent nature of linguistic units, of words:

Chaque fois que j'emploie le mot *Messieurs*, j'en renouvelle la matière; c'est un nouvel acte phonique et un nouvel acte psychologique. Le lien entre les deux emplois du même mot ne repose ni sur l'identité matérielle, ni sur l'exacte similitude des sens, mais sur des éléments qu'il faudra rechercher et qui feront toucher de très près la nature véritable des unités linguistiques.

What problem could be more important for linguistics than to discern the true nature of the units of language?

The principle of the arbitrariness of the sign thus raises a fundamental issue, but also leads to an apparent contradiction: we cannot communicate unless signs have a fixed meaning, and yet when we communicate signs express different meanings. A necessary condition of communication and the actual circumstances in which it is accomplished are like the two sides of a coin but they do not seem to fit together. This leads to a widespread conflict in semantics: viewing the word either as an autonomous unit with its own stable meaning or as dependent on the context for its meaning. As one scholar points out:

Analyses of word-meaning can usually be divided into those which assign a meaning to a word in isolation from a specific context of use, and those which regard the meaning of a word as being largely, if not entirely, dependent upon a specific context of use. (Perkins 1983:26)

Like any other discipline which tries to proceed in an intelligible way, linguistics assumes that its object is somehow orderly and so knowable. This contradiction cannot therefore be in language itself, but must be in our way of looking at words. It is then in the viewpoint we adopt in approaching words that a means of reconciling these two conceptions of meaning is to be sought. Moreover if Saussure is right, explaining how a word can be both monosemous and polysemous by finding the link between its different uses will help us discern the real nature of linguistic units, a primordial task for any linguist.

One way of dealing with this dilemma is to ignore one of its horns. Thus for some, as Perkins suggests, words acquire their meaning from the context. However, since all the words making up the context are presumably in the same predicament, one can only

conjecture on where the context gets its meaning from. Ultimately, the necessary condition for communication discussed above is downplayed or even ignored in this approach, as when it is claimed that "A word on its own is not meaningful; what it means depends on its context" (Mittins 1962:1).

Stern adopts a different approach but his attempt to deal with the problem is hardly more satisfactory. Claiming that the idea of a permanent core meaning remains a "phantom of logical abstraction" because never defined, he turns to the referent:

The constant element in the meaning of the word *camera*, whenever used, is the fact that the word is referred to one or more of the objects belonging to the category of "cameras". That category is an empirical fact, the existence of which a philologist can simply take for granted. It is a problem for epistemology.... (1931:40)

The difficulty here is that, if, as Stern claims, categories are empirical facts, they must be the same for all people regardless of their language, and this, as any linguist knows, is not the case [note 3]. Ultimately, Stern's approach is unsatisfactory because it amounts to hypostatizing categories and then turning the whole problem over to another discipline.

A more recent attempt to deal with the question conceives of meaning as a category with a number of members, some of which, perceived as prototypes, provide the central or stable meaning, with variant senses that depend on perceiving other members as atypical or dissimilar in certain respects from the prototypes [note 4]. The key point here is the relation between the different senses of the word. According to one author, "... the related senses of a polysemous item do not have to share an invariant meaning core.... to make the presence of a common semantic component a defining feature of polysemy is unduly restrictive" (Taylor 1989:106). This has led some to suggest that homonyms might be included in the same category. In short, there is no common semantic basis for the meaning since "No attribute is shared by all members of the category" (Heine 1993:114), and so one wonders how the one sign/one meaning requirement for communication can be met.

In the light of these and other very different approaches to the meaning-sign relationship, one can readily appreciate Saussure's perspicacity in proposing that it is of fundamental importance for linguistics to seek out what constitutes the unity of a word throughout its various uses. One can also understand his caution in not venturing to undertake the search himself. And yet, as we shall see, he does give one of the key elements for resolving the dilemma when he maintains that each use of a word is a new phonic act and a new psychological act. In order to make this clear, however, one other manner of approaching the problem must be first be recalled.

This way of addressing the problem is based on the idea that a word has the capacity to express diverse senses. Bolinger (1963:134) for example suggests that a word has an arsenal of senses ready for use: "When we say that the context determines the sense we mean not that it imposes a sense but that it selects one that is already there." Similarly, for Bréal (1921:145) when we use a word, only one of its senses emerges into consciousness: "On n'a même pas la peine de supprimer les autres sens du mot : ces sens n'existent pas pour nous, ils ne franchissent pas le seuil de notre conscience." Stern (1931:68) alludes to this capacity when he distinguishes between "the meaning of a word in actual speech," its "actual meaning" and "the meaning content attaching to an isolated word." Waldron (1967:61) makes the point that "meaning as a function of the word ... is in a sense prior to any use of the word in speech" and goes on (:63) to talk about the meaning of a word in terms of "what a word can mean — its meaning-potential."

Ullmann (1957:62) carries the distinction to the point of suggesting the word has two ways of existing:

... word-symbols are stored in our minds in a virtual state. They are only actualised in "la parole", i.e. in contexts; it is in contexts that they acquire the determinateness which is an attribute of the actualised state. "Man" and "the man now knocking at the door" illustrate this contrast between the two phases, the two forms of subsistence.

Here, then, is a way of grasping the two horns of the dilemma: to admit the reality of the two apparently contradictory aspects of meaning by proposing that it has two modes of existence within language, potential (or virtual) and actual. That is to say, if one is prepared to grant what these scholars suggest, the contradiction can be resolved. The necessary condition of communication — one sign, one meaning — is fulfilled because the meaning-potential of a word does not generally vary for a speaker (i.e., in synchrony); in its virtual state, the word is like an element of a code because it has one constant potential meaning. On the other hand, the circumstances of usage — diverse actual meanings expressed by the same sign [note 5] — are also respected because the inherent property of any potential is to give rise to various actualizations. This approach to the problem of the fundamental nature of linguistic units appears therefore to be worth exploring.

To understand more fully what is involved in thus viewing the word as having a dual mode of existence, it is important to discern as clearly as possible the relationship between the potential meaning and the actual meanings. The most obvious characteristic is that this is a permissive relationship, one which allows for several realizations but prescribes none. The potential meaning offers a limited range of possibilities but the sense actualized at a given moment is determined by other conditions, such as the particular experience or intended message the speaker wishes to communicate. That is to say, as a necessary pre-condition of speech, the potential meaning is one of the causal factors in the use of a word, but not the only one. Discerning the potential meaning of a word will, thus, help us understand any use of a word but will not give the whole explanation for it.

Another characteristic of this relationship between potential and actual is that it is a relationship between one hidden meaning and several apparent meanings. While the multiplicity of actual meanings can be observed in discourse, the unicity of the potential meaning must be conceived, imagined as it exists in tongue [note 6]. It would not do to imagine the various actual meanings as already existing in the potential meaning, as discriminated in tongue, because this would deny the unicity of the potential meaning and so fail to fulfill the necessary condition for communication. Rather, the potential meaning must be conceived both as distinct from the observed senses and as capable of giving rise to them. This brings us to the crux of the problem posed by the arbitrariness of the sign: to show how a speaker can obtain several different senses from one meaning, several different effects from the same causal factor.

To my knowledge, only one linguist, Gustave Guillaume, has ever addressed this issue as the crucial problem for discerning the nature of the unit of language: how can one imagine a single meaning potential such that, at the moment one wishes to say something, it is available to produce any one of several actualized meanings? Guillaume's solution is simple: imagine the potential meaning, not as a static set of components or impressions, but rather as a mechanism, an operation to be activated at the moment of need, something like a computer program. By holding up this operation at the appropriate point, the speaker can produce the particular sense required. Because it can be

intercepted at will, this meaning-realizing operation can thus represent the constant impression or impressions inherent in the potential meaning under conditions which vary according to the particular experience the speaker wants to talk about. An example will help to make this clear.

One of the most frequently discussed words in English is the determiner *any*. Although most scholars agree that it is a quantifier, there is much disagreement as to the quantity it actually expresses. Those with a logical bent are struck primarily by the fact that *any* often expresses a quantity equivalent to that expressed by "every" or "all", as in:

- (1) Any violation will be prosecuted. (Vendler 1967:92)
- (2) Confiscate any alcohol you find.

Because of such examples, *any* is sometimes called a universal quantifier. On the basis of this interpretation, Quine (1960:138-140) considers that *any* has the widest scope possible in:

- (3) If any member contributes, he gets a poppy.
- (4) I do not know any poem.

Although various scholars have contested this, pointing out that *any* could be interpreted "even one" in (4) and "one or more" in (3), Savin (1960, title) supports the view that *any* always expresses a wide scope, going to the point of arguing that "Every *any* means 'every'."

Those with a grammatical bent, on the other hand, are struck primarily by the fact that *any* and *some* are often near equivalents, as in the following example from Lakoff (1969:609):

- (5) If you eat any candy, I'll whip you.

It is argued that *some* and *any* differ insofar as the existential status of the quantity is concerned, and so they are sometimes called existential quantifiers. Examples like this, or the following with a singular noun:

- (6) Pick any card. (= one card)

evoke smaller quantities and so *any* is interpreted as having narrow scope here. Such considerations lead some scholars to view *any* as a sort of reflex of *some*, and to consider the "universal" readings are really a matter of conversational implicature.

Thus concern for the one sign/one meaning condition for communication leads to opposite results, but whether one opts for the universal (wide scope) position or the existential (narrow scope) position, the very attempt to adopt one or the other necessarily involves a reductionist view, an attempt to explain away the data that does not fit in. To respect more adequately the facts of observation, Ladusaw (1980) argues that there are two *any*'s, a position that, in effect, proposes two identical signs with differing meanings, two homonyms. Although this would respect the one sign/one meaning requirement, it would raise other problems: explaining the coincidence of signs, and even more difficult, explaining how homonyms can have closely related meanings — both expressing quantity. Thus the two well established senses of *any* complicate things, and in fact the problem may well be even more complicated if it is exact that *any* can express not only narrow scope and wide scope, but also intermediate scopes, or as Webster's Third puts it, "one, some, or all indiscriminately of whatever quantity." In the final analysis, the whole problem of analyzing *any*, like that of analyzing other polysemous words, boils down to discerning the relationship between the different meanings it expresses, as Saussure pointed out.

The very fact of adopting the point of view put forward by Guillaume, namely that the meanings a word expresses are actualizations, leads one to go beyond opposing the different senses in an either-or fashion and to seek what relates them, working back in this

way to the potential meaning. In the case of *any*, what opposes the actual meanings is clear: the extent of scope it expresses, wide, intermediate or narrow. What relates these senses to one another is the fact that all are expressions of quantity and, as it turns out, this quantity is seen as a greater or smaller part of the quantity evoked by the substantive [note 7]. It remains then to imagine a potential meaning which could give rise to a representation of the quantifier's extent of reference such that it may vary in scope from one use to another. Thanks to the operative principle underlying a potential meaning, one can postulate a mental process within the field of quantity so that at any point during the process one will obtain a representation of quantity. Furthermore, if it is postulated [note 8] that this mental process or operation begins at a point corresponding to maximum quantity and ends at a point corresponding to minimum quantity, it can be held up at the point corresponding to the scope required. This can best be depicted by means of a diagram, where *M* = maximum scope, *I* = intermediate scope and *m* = minimum scope, as in Figure 2.

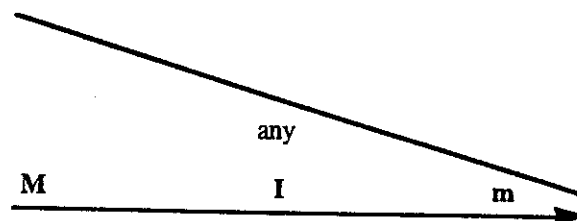


Figure 2

Granted some such operational potential meaning, the "universal", "every" sense of (1) and (2) can be obtained by intercepting the process as it begins, at *M*. The "one" sense of (6), as well as the "no matter how little" sense of (5) would arise if the process were intercepted at its end, at *m*. Likewise for the "even one" sense of (4). As for (3), it might express an interception at *m* if the speaker had in mind "even one", or an interception somewhere in *I* if an intermediate sense is intended like "some, I don't know how many." An unambiguous expression of the *any* process intercepted at an intermediate point *I* is found in the following attested example:

(7) If any words or phrases are formulaic, they will be.

Here the sense is "if there are formulaic words or phrases...." "if some such entities do exist." Thanks then to the postulated meaning potential, a distinction within the so-called existential meanings comes into focus, namely that between a minimum quantity as in (6) and an intermediate quantity as in (7). Likewise, this distinction permits us to understand why (3) might be ambiguous for the reader: without more contextual clues, one cannot be sure whether the writer intercepted the *any* operation somewhere in the *I* range or at *m*.

This all too brief sketch will have to suffice to suggest how the notion of potential meaning as an operative possibility can be implemented as an analytical technique. Although by no means easy to imagine, once the operative potential has been discerned, the different pieces of the puzzle begin to fall into place. As in this example, it often makes the differences between observed senses clearer and so helps to bring hitherto overlooked senses into focus. It also permits the observer to isolate the meaning import of the element under observation from that of other meaningful elements in the sentence. More important, however, it serves to resolve apparent contradictions in the data by situating the observed differences within the framework of what they have in common, of

what is alike. This, according to Bronowski (1965:13-14), is the essential work of the scientist:

The scientist looks for order in the appearances of nature by exploring such likenesses. For order does not display itself of itself; if it can be said to be there at all, it is not there for the mere looking. There is no way of pointing a finger or a camera at it; order must be discovered and, in a deep sense, it must be created. What we see, as we see it, is mere disorder.

Furthermore, this meaning potential is conceived of as a causal factor, as a necessary condition for the speaker to produce the observed senses. As such it helps us to understand why the speaker used a given word or morpheme and so provides a basis for explaining the observed data.

This, then, is the great advantage in postulating not only that meaning exists as a potential before it is observed in its particular senses in discourse, but that the potential meaning is essentially the possibility of an operation: the one sign/one meaning requirement for communication is met in such a way that the various senses expressed are seen as possible consequences of a single prior condition. In this respect the potential meaning postulate gives a plausible hypothesis of the way the speaker actually produces the meanings observed. Certainly it permits us to understand not only why there must be, in Saussure's terms, "a new psychological act" every time we use a word, but also what constitutes "the link between the uses of the same word" and even to explore what is fundamental to linguistics, "the real nature of linguistic units."

NOTES

1. Onomatopoetic units, being comparatively rare, serve as "exceptions that prove the rule" rather than counter examples that disprove the principle.
2. The context and situation within which the word is used may, of course, play a role in helping one interpret strange words.
3. A good illustration of this is the reactions of students in a class made up of francophones and anglophones. To the question "Est-ce qu'un fauteuil est une chaise?" francophones replied: "Mais non!" To the question "Is an armchair a chair?" anglophones answered: "Of course!"
4. As Blumenthal (1991:302) points out, a prototypical approach was evoked some years ago by Ullmann in his *Précis de sémantique française*.
5. As Saussure implies, the same problem arises for the physical sign, since the actualizations of the "acoustic image" vary considerably from one use to another, but this is not our concern here.
6. Saussure's *langue* is here translated "tongue" (cf. a similar usage in expressions like "the mother tongue", "the tongues of men") to avoid all the confusion arising from other translations of the term.
7. Within the limits of the present article it is not possible to give a complete analysis of *any* to show that the quantity it expresses is seen as a part represented as hypothetical whereas *some* represents a part seen as "thetical" or real. See Hirtle 1988 for details.
8. For the justification of this postulate, see Hirtle 1988.

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