Nature of Meaning

If intentionality (our ability to think 'about' things) is a great puzzle about the mind, then the related phenomenon of meaning (which is the 'aboutness' of words) is a similar difficulty about language. In modern philosophy a 'theory of meaning' is not just an attempt to explain this phenomenon, but also a key part of any larger account of thought, knowledge, science and reality. Can meaning be reduced to brain events or information, or is meaning a mode of reality which defies analysis? Is meaning rooted in the external world, or is it a private creation of the mind? How does meaning relate to reference, and does truth have a role in meaning? Does meaning only attach to verbal sentences, or are there also underlying non-verbal 'propositions'?

The earliest accounts of meaning identify it wholly with mental events. If thought is composed of '**ideas**', then words are taken to be **labels** somehow attached to these ideas, and so language clarifies our thinking, and passes it on to other people. The different types of words reflect the concepts they express, and each concept indicates what the related word refers to, as well as information about it. Most of these concepts are 'universals', because they apply equally to many different items. A modern variant says that meanings are '**pictures**' in the mind, correlating with the elements of part of reality. The main objection to this view was that it makes meanings too private, when language must be a public matter. To communicate, we must share identical meanings, so a more abstract approach is needed. We must also explain the meanings of negative truths, which don't map neatly onto ideas.

A theory which made communication more central than expression of ideas to the nature of meaning focused on the **speaker's intentions**. It is obvious that when we speak we intend to pass on our thoughts to others. This theory said that it is also crucial that the listener perceive this intention. There is a 'natural' sense of meaning in 'dark clouds mean rain', but for non-natural meaning in speech it is said that a speaker wants to induce a belief in an audience, and wants the audience to see that this is what the speaker intends. Hence meaning primarily concerns speech, and meaning is shared between minds. The source of the communicated meanings is in the propositional attitudes (such as belief, hope and denial) of the speaker, and so this theory retains the idea that meanings are mental events. In ironic speech the speaker's intention is different from the literal meaning, so this theory also needs a 'pragmatic' aspect, giving rules of communication that extend beyond what is literally said. The theory gives a very illuminating account of conversation, but critics doubt whether it captures the most basic aspects of meaning.

A very different approach to meaning focuses on relations to the external world, and not just on events within minds. This has to involve truth, to specify which parts of the world are relevant to the meanings being expressed. The proposal is that the meaning of a sentence is its **truth conditions** – that is, how some part of the world has to be if the sentence is true. If I say 'the cat is in the kitchen', the meaning of the sentence is the cat being located in the kitchen. If I am lying, the meaning is still how things would be if I were speaking the truth. Hence meaning is best understood as situations in possible worlds (one of which is the actual world). If what I say is true, then the truth conditions are found in the actual world. The theory must also say what 'true' means; it is usually said to be 'robust' correspondence, or some 'deflationary' minimal version. The theory is usually realist about the conditions referred to, but an anti-realist version could specify the truth-conditions as other parts of the language. The theory only gives the literal meaning, and struggles with conditional truths (in 'if….then' form), so more needs to be said about the influence of context, and of what is involved in *understanding* the meaning. It also needs to distinguish two different sentences with the same truth conditions ('no cats in the room' and 'no dogs in the room').

A tougher account based on the external world said meaning is not just how the world is, but that the speaker must know something about these truth-conditions. This is the '**verificationist**' (or 'justificationist') theory of meaning, which says that meaning is only possible if the truth of the sentence could be verified. Various formulations of the principle were proposed, all asserting the minimum requirement that observations must be relevant to the sentence. Without that condition, the sentence was meaningless. The principle was used to attack traditional metaphysics, as empty because unverifiable. Tautologies (such as definitions) were permitted as exceptions. The strongest version said that the meaning *is* the method of verification, but weaker versions skirted around what meaning actually is. The problem with this very scientific theory was that it ruled out too much. If something is in principle unobservable, the theory says we can't even talk about it. Hence fantasies and idle speculations are meaningless, when we normally just suspect them of being false. Verificationism now has few followers, but its question about when a sentence is truly meaningful remains important.

A different approach stuck closer to the surface of the language (avoiding both mental meanings and reference to external reality), by saying that meaning is entirely a matter of **use**. The analogy is with chess pieces, which have no intrinsic character, but mere rules for their activity. Logical connectives like 'or' and 'but' seem like that, so maybe all words have meaning in this way. Hence 'cat' is typically used when cats are around, and truths about cats are appropriate in cat contexts. Such speech may be appropriate in non-cat contexts, but there are still rules about its usage. The key point is that there is no more to knowing the meaning of a word than knowing how to use it, and if you don't know how to use it, you clearly don't understand it. A variant of the theory says the rules are internal to the speaker, rather than being part of the language community, and the meaning is given by the **role** within the system. The view that meaning equates with usage or with role (perhaps in inferences) is favoured by those who are fairly **sceptical** about the whole idea that there is such a thing as 'meaning', apart from the language we experience.

So far we have talked about the words have meaning, presumably building up into larger groups. An alternative view is that the basic unit of meaning is the statement, so that **sentence-meaning** comes first, with word-meaning derived from it. When it is further observed that to understand a sentence you need a lot of background information, the basic unit of meaning becomes ever wider, and the strongest version is the **holistic** view of meaning, which says nothing less than a whole language is involved in the meaning of even its smallest parts.