

- (1)
 - (a) Today we're leaving reference behind and will instead start discussing meaning. Where theories of reference are mainly focused on singular terms, theories of meaning are mostly concerned with how we understand complete sentences.
 - (b) We'll begin with talking a little bit about the traditional view of meaning and communication which is often ascribed to John Locke and then about the propositional theory of meaning, its somewhat more sophisticated relative.
 - (c) But, most importantly, we will consider *verificationism*, the theory of meaning which was proposed and defended by the logical positivists during the first half of the 20th century. As one of the first modern views of meaning, it has had a large impact on the debate even though pretty much no-one believes it anymore.
- (2) So, the view of meaning which Locke discusses is sometimes called an *ideational theory* of meaning. The basic idea is that meaningful expressions correspond with mental states of the speaker which are made public by being dressed up in words.
 - (a) This has some similarities with Frege's view that sentences express complete thoughts or, as we'll get to next, propositions. But there are some crucial differences.
 - (b) Most importantly, Locke thinks that what's being expressed by an utterance is some actual mental state specifically of the speaker.
 - (c) Further, Locke doesn't just ascribe mental states as the meaning of complete sentences but also of individual words. Frege, on the other hand, would only say that terms and predicates have a sense which contribute to the complete thought which is expressed by a full sentence.
- (3) There are many challenges for the kind of view just sketched to become a good theory of meaning.
 - (a) What kind of mental state is being expressed by a word? A mental image would be far too specific for general terms, such as 'bird' or 'human'.
 - (b) There are many words whose grammatical function is structural. It's hard to see what kind of mental state could correspond to words like 'is', 'from', and 'if'.
 - (c) But the big problem for this picture is to explain how we manage to understand each other. Mental states are subjective, unavailable, and differ from speaker to speaker. According to the ideational theory, then, words have different meaning for different speakers.

This kind of naive ideational theory is not really held by anyone today. But next time, we will discuss a distant heir to the idea that meaning should primarily be explained through mental states in the form of Grice's programme.

- (4) The last problem is what leads to *propositional theories* of meaning. Essentially, the basic idea is that there is some collection of thoughts we can have, propositions, which all humans have

access too. They are, as Frege says,

[T]he common property of many and therefore is not a part or a mode of the individual mind. For one can hardly deny that mankind has a common store of thoughts which is transmitted from one generation to another. (Frege, 1892/1948, p. 212)

And, according to the propositional theorist, these thoughts are precisely what we express through complete sentences.

- (5) So, one of the things which propositional theories try to capture is that meaning is something public and *intersubjective*. It's shared by and accessible to every speaker of a language. The picture of communication one tries to capture is something along the following lines.
 - (a) Sentences of a language correspond to different meanings. This correspondence relation is what makes a particular sentence mean what it does and not something else.
 - (b) When a speaker wants to convey some specific content to a hearer, they choose the sentence which expresses that meaning. They're able to do that because they know which sentences correspond to which meanings.
 - (c) The hearer apprehends which sentence was uttered by the speaker and can determine which meaning was expressed because they also know which sentences correspond to which meanings.

This is a very common picture of how communication works which is shared between many of the theories we are going to discuss.

- (6) Apart from saying that propositions are abstract possible thoughts, they're usually explained in terms the role they play for the theory of meaning.
 - (a) What separates a meaningful sentence from an empty string of words or symbols is that the former expresses a proposition.
 - (b) Complete sentences are the kind of things which express propositions, not individual words. It is common, though, to say that propositions are *structured* in a way where it's component parts correspond to the grammatical or logical form of the sentence itself. This is essentially what Frege does since he thinks that the proposition expressed by a sentence is determined by the senses of it's constituent parts.
 - (c) Propositions are also the kind of content which our mental states have. That's why I can say that

Max believes that Lewis Carroll is a good author.

because he told me so. But I can say that he believes so, even if his original utterance was in Swedish. The proposition which would be expressed by his Swedish utterance is the same as the one which is expressed by the English sentence which we're now saying that he believes.

- (d) Propositions, not sentences, are what have a truth-value. Propositions are abstract entities which can't change over time. What can change, however, is the relation between propositions and sentences. Hence, which sentence expresses which proposition can change.

Propositions, then, are a kind of abstract but specific *meaning-entities* which are attributed to sentences. Theories which work this way, by describing a kind of object as the meaning of a sentence, are usually called *entity theories*.

- (7) This, as always, brings us to the counterarguments. Although propositional theories avoids the the particular problems with the Lockean ideational theory, it faces some other obstacles.
 - (a) Propositions seem like quite mysterious entities. They are eternal, abstract things which do not have any causal effects. They are possible contents of thought which exist long before and long after the humans who they express claims about have existed.
 - (b) It's also unclear whether we've actually provided any explanation of our language by introducing propositions. As Gilbert Harman (1967-1968) points out, we just seem to have restated our original intuitions about meaning using more complicated words. What explanatory power do propositions add to our theories of language?
 - (c) Language is not independent from human behaviour. We utter sentences *because* we want to express their content. What we say also affects the hearer and social reality. But propositions are supposed to be abstract and causally inert.
- (8) None of these objections are knock-down arguments. Essentially, they are just demanding further explanation for how we should understand what propositions are and that proponents show how they can be used to provide a better explanation of language than we could without them. There's not really a problem with postulating entities to do explanatory work. We have no problem with introducing what initially seems to be mysterious forces and particles in physics when it fits the data and increases the explanatory power of the theory.
- (9) The same goes for the connection between human behaviour and our use of language. The challenge here is real and important, but that doesn't mean that it's insurmountable for a propositional theory. Here, the distinction between semantics and pragmatics plays an important part. It's possible that there are pragmatic factors which allow us to explain how the propositional content of a sentence can play a role in explaining behaviour even though it's causally cut off from us.
- (10) Today, more sophisticated versions of propositional theories are among the most commonly held by analytic philosophers of language. In the later parts of this course, we will discuss *possible worlds semantics* which attempts to meet these explanatory challenges.
- (11) But now we're going to look at the theory of meaning which was proposed by the logical positivists.
 - (a) As I'm sure you know from the courses in the history of philosophy, logical positivism, or logical empiricism, was a hugely influential philosophical movement during the first half of the 20th century.
 - (b) One of the motivations of this movement was as a counter-reaction to speculative metaphysics and how they thought that a lot of philosophy had gotten stuck in obscure and meaningless uses of language which didn't lead anywhere.
 - (c) In contrast, they considered Frege's new formulation of logic and the enormous success of contemporary science, both of which seemed to trace back to careful explication of their concepts and methods.

- (d) Hence, they put forward their philosophy of language as the main tool for making philosophy both more successful and more scientific. Analytic philosophy has never been the same since.
- (12) Their basic idea for distinguishing meaningful language from nonsense was that a meaningful sentence has to be able to make some difference to what we expect will happen. If I utter a sentence which, even if you assume it to be true, makes no difference to what you expect to experience then what content have I really expressed?
- (13) (a) Every sentence comes with a *verification condition*, which is the set of all possible experiences which would show that the sentence is true.
- (b) According to the positivists, this verification condition is exactly the meaning of the sentence. That's what we need to know in order to understand it. One way to think of this is as saying that a proposition is a set of verifying experiences.
- (c) This leads to what they call the *verification principle*: a sentence is meaningful if and only if it has a (non-empty) verification condition. That is, only sentence which could hypothetically be confirmed by some possible observation are meaningful.
- (d) It's important to read 'possible' here in an epistemic sense. They don't require verification to be *metaphysically* possible or able to actually happen. They only demand that it's possible to describe experiences which would confirm the sentence.

Naturally, this theory of meaning is often called *verificationism*.

- (14) The logical positivists allow for one exemption from the verification principle: *analytic sentences*.
- (a) They rely on Kant's distinction between analytic and *synthetic* sentences. Analytic sentences are those which are true or false automatically by virtue of their meaning. Synthetic sentences are those whose truth-value depends on the way the world actually is.
- (b) Their reason for making this exemption is that analytic sentences because of their status can't have empirical consequences. Because their truth-value is guaranteed by the meaning of the words, there can't be any possible observations which can confirm them.
- (c) Even so, analytic sentences are not ones they want to discard as meaningless. If they did, then mathematical and logical truths would be nonsense. But we don't want to say that about sentences like,

$$1 + 1 = 2$$

Either Elin likes ice cream or Elin doesn't like ice cream.

- (d) We also don't want to exclude sentences whose truth-value depend more directly on their meaning than on their logical form.

If Lund is north of Malmö, then Malmö is south of Lund.

This sentence is made true entirely on the basis of the meaning of the words 'north' and 'south'. But it would be absurd to call it meaningless.

- (15) This all brings us to the customary list of objections.

- (a) Just like the early theories of reference we've discussed, verificationism is really mainly interested in descriptive or fact stating language. It doesn't leave much room for explaining language which doesn't try to describe the world because of its focus on verification conditions.
- (b) A lot of our descriptive language is pretty far removed from our possible experiences. The sentence

There is a black hole at the centre of our galaxy.

does seem to have a verification condition. But this condition will be in terms of a complex of observatory measurements about how the light from distant stars is altered by passing close to the centre of the galaxy. If verificationism is right, then that would be what the sentence means. But surely it says something much simpler and commonplace than that.

- (c) Is the verification principle itself a meaningful sentence? It doesn't seem analytically true that the meaning of a sentence is a set of possible experiences. But it also doesn't seem to have any verification conditions. If it has, then we have to have some independent ability to recognise meaningful sentences without already presupposing the sentence.
- (16) But the big problem comes from Pierre Duhem and W.V.O. Quine. Quine's paper *Two Dogmas of Empiricism* (1951) is often described as such a powerful attack that logical positivism never recovered. It contains several important arguments, but since we'll discuss the text during the seminar I'm only going to discuss one here.
- (a) Quine points out that no sentence can be verified in isolation. Whenever we draw conclusions from some observation of the world, we do so with the help of some background theory.
 - (b) When we set up an experiment to test a hypothesis we have to assume that our experimental apparatus works the way it's supposed to and as described by our background theory.
 - (c) Not even simple observations about tables, chairs, and walls can be verified without the assumption that there's no trick of light, dependent on angle of view, or that the observers' clothing is unimportant.
 - (d) It's not wrong that we assume these things. If anything, we have to in order to proceed with the empirical gathering of data. But it does mean that we can't identify what experience would verify an individual sentence. And that's the foundational idea that verificationism is built upon.