

# Semantical Investigations

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Fragments from a recently discovered MS, probably written by a ghost writer.

*The most important part of what follows is not contained in it. This is because I have tried to give sketches of a landscape from several perspectives, but found myself incapable of representing the whole, at least before the deadline. I assume that others have already explained the points I make much more thoroughly, but I am indifferent to that. Although everything I say is undoubtedly true, I am not sure I have solved the problems of semantics once and for all. I hope that others will come who may do better.*

(...)

§1. In many textbooks, it is said that natural language is ambiguous. Usually, several examples are given, and it is illustrated that ambiguity comes in various types. Thus, there is lexical ambiguity, which occurs when a word has multiple meanings. 'Bank', 'plane', and many more, are ambiguous words. There is also syntactic ambiguity, which arises from sentence structure. "Three semanticists attend a festive occasion" would be an example.

It seems to me that in these textbooks, a certain view of natural language is presupposed. Namely that natural languages are systems that consist of words, and that each word is connected to a particular meaning. Although it may be difficult to explain what exactly such a meaning is, it can at least be represented by other words, as happens in dictionaries. Further, words are used to build sentences, and these also have meanings, which, in turn, depend on the meanings of the words occurring in the sentence, as well as on the structure of the sentence. Now, (as some think) unfortunately, words are often connected to more than one meaning, and this is what we call lexical ambiguity. Also, there are various sentence-building procedures which may result in a sentence that looks the same as a sentence that is differently structured – differences that do not show at the surface – and this explains why syntactic ambiguity exists. One of the challenges for a semantic theory is to resolve such ambiguities.

The semantic theory is concerned with languages as systems. What a word is, and what a sentence is, can be established without recourse to a speaker, a writer, or a context of utterance. Words and sentences are typically uttered or written, but it does not matter who does this, and where, when and why. Ambiguities are properties of words and sentences. It is of no concern whether words and sentences are spoken or written. Speech and writing are mere modalities, different ways of symbolising the same linguistic items. Language as a system is neutral with respect to these modalities.

§2. It seems to me that this is a sophisticated view of how human language functions. We could also say, it is a view of a language which is more sophisticated than the one people use in everyday conversation. It is a language that is used among literate people, that has been formed and transformed by centuries of language study and reform. This language is primarily a written language, used by members of a community who share conventions imprinted on them during years of instruction.

§3. Consider the following situation. In a BBC television quiz (QI), it is asked how customs differ from one European country to another when it comes to the number of kisses exchanged in social kissing. In the UK, you do one (at most), in Holland they do three, but there is also a part of Europe where five kisses are customary. Which is it? Corsica. Then the quiz master, Stephen Fry, makes the mistake of constructing and uttering a pun: "Can you tell me which sort of Europeans usually give five kisses? Course I can (making it sound exactly like 'Corsican')". It is a mistake because puns are considered embarrassingly bad humour in the UK.

§4. If I say 'Corsican / Course I can', am I not saying something ambiguous? If I do, am I uttering an ambiguous word or an ambiguous sentence? But neither the word 'Corsican' nor the sentence 'Course I can' is ambiguous. Should we say that the utterance is ambiguous between a word and a sentence? It would follow that there is third type of ambiguity, which does not occur at either the lexical or syntactical level, but which precisely concerns the level involved. What does this do to our neat division of types of ambiguity? The division presupposed that we could look at different levels at which ambiguity occurred, and now it appears that an utterance can be ambiguous because we don't know to what level the utterance belongs!

§5. Could that particular ambiguity arise in written language? I had to take unusual trouble in rendering the quiz master's pun in writing. If I had simply 'written down what he said' it would not have been clear what the pun was. In fact, I had to refer explicitly to speech sounds, and present several ways of writing the same expression to make that clear. Without this effort, and using ordinary writing, the pun could not be described. But it can be described anyway. Yes, but it can *only* be described, not *used* as a joke, however bad, in writing.

§6. Do we still think that the same language system can be expressed either in speech or in writing, without affecting the system? Well, it depends. We could say that there is still a single system, but that our manner of expressing it sometimes gives rise to effects that are specific to that manner. Linguists have noticed this long ago, observing that sometimes different words are pronounced in the same way, calling them 'homophones', such as the words 'plane' and 'plain'. But these are really different words, which happen to sound the same. That 'plain' and 'plane' are different words is clear from how they are written. But don't be deceived by the choice of a particular writing system. Use the International Phonetic Alphabet, and you will see that they are pronounced in the same way.

§7. But then the use of a particular writing system may make expressions ambiguous: [PLEIN] is ambiguous between 'plane' and 'plain'. No. The IPA is a notation designed to represent spoken words. Its expressions are not ambiguous at all. But ordinary writing, just like speech, represents words and sentences. It seems therefore, that we should distinguish between *unclarity about what is said* (which words and sentences are uttered) as may happen when homophones are uttered, and the *ambiguity of words and sentences*, which is an inherent property of them.

§8. Have we not learned that alphabetical writing represents speech sounds? Each letter, or combination of letters, stands for a sound, so that if a person knows how to read, she knows which spoken words and sentences are represented. Ordinary spelling may be less regular and exact than the IPA, but surely we can read out loud whatever we read. And can we not legitimately claim that the written minutes of a meeting do or do not state 'what was actually said'?

§9. "Alphabetical writing represents speech and letters stand for sounds". What do spaces stand for? Do they represent silent periods between words? Don't think, but listen! In normal speech there are no spaces indicating word boundaries.

Whereas a sentence like this is hard to read. If in alphabetical writing no spaces were used, this would be a source of ambiguity: 'ishetherealone?' could represent what we write as 'is he there alone?' or as 'is he the real one?' When we 'write up what was said' we are actually translating from spoken language to written language. It is only because we are well trained in the use of both that we don't perceive how different they are, and how complex the process actually is. You can read words fairly easily although letters have been interchanged - if the letters in the previous sentence stood for speech sounds, and their order represented the order in which they were produced, could a hearer understand what was said?

§10. We thought that ambiguity was an important and pervasive feature of 'natural languages'. But if written language gives rise to different sorts of ambiguity than spoken

language, should we not be less indiscriminate as to what sort of natural language we are dealing with: the speech sounds produced and uttered when people are talking face to face, or the written marks we read on paper and computer screens?

(The MS continues with a number of pages containing hardly legible handwriting. At some point, mention is made of a paper entitled 'Homophones across word boundaries' in a journal called 'Spoken Language Semantics'. On the last page, several unnumbered paragraphs occur, reading as follows:)

You first have to take language away from its natural habitat and put it into the laboratory of the linguist before it starts getting 'properties' like ambiguity.

Why are puns funny (at least to some people)? Because we do not normally perceive that a single linguistic item may be used for different purposes in different contexts. It requires effort, or a context contrived by a comedian to see that. And this gives us a clue to the nature of ambiguity in general.

To work with 'readings' which 'sentences' may have – the terminology betrays the erroneous starting point. The 'readings' are 'possible contexts of effective use'. As a language user, what you in fact know are those contexts; it requires effort to focus on the linguistic means used in those contexts and to observe that they may, in isolation, be similar or the same. In contexts contrived by dictionary makers, linguists, semanticists we see that words and sentences are ambiguous. As users of natural language we are seldom aware of, or bothered by ambiguity at all. If this were not the case, how could natural language be as effective as it is? If our analysis is correct, ambiguity is not a property of linguistic items such as words and sentences, but a consequence, an artefact of linguistic analysis.

Es ist klar, dass wir auf grundfalscher Fährte sind. (Type in 'auf grundfalscher Fährte' at Google, and it will be asked: 'did you mean *aufgrund falscher Fährte?*')