

A brief review of several meaning theories

1. Teleosemantics
2. Verificationism
3. Truth-based theory
4. Truth-based theory: modal logic extension
5. Use theory

1. Teleosemantics

- We should consider teleosemantics last, but since we've discussed the Kripkenstein Skeptical Challenge, and we've seen a teleosemantic response to the challenge, we'll start with it.
- The major figure for teleosemantics is Ruth Millikan.



Teleology

- This is a teleological theory of semantics
- *Teleology* is the study of ends. In this context, we mean the study of purposes.
- Millikan uses the term *proper function* for the kinds of purposes that she aims to explain. (Alternative names for this include “teleofunction.”)
- Millikan’s view is that the proper function of a structure is whatever that kind of structure does which resulted in that kind of structure getting copied.
- For example: The proper function of the heart is to pump blood because that is the thing that hearts do which results in them providing a fitness benefit to the organism; and this in turn resulted in the heart being copied (by helping organisms reproduce and therefore create new such hearts).
- In short: copies of the heart exist because they pump blood.
- This we take to explain what it is for the proper function of the heart to be to pump blood.

Teleosemantics

- Millikan supposes that we have inherited some structures that have the proper function of enabling certain language functions.
- For example: we inherit (presumably a structure that gives us) an ability to identify kinds of objects and substances.
- This structure will then explain how reference works: we have some inherited ability to identify things, and we use this to identify, say, a person or a metal.

Teleosemantics v. Kripkenstein

- How will this answer the skeptical challenge of Kripkenstein?
- Consider an example that more easily fits Millikan's theory.
- We suppose that everything Susan heard in the past is consistent with:
 - “Horse” means horse
 - “Horse” means horse-in-the-United-States or cow-under-the-Eiffel-Tower
- Kripke's demand: tell me what fact makes the weird-horse-rule wrong!

Teleosemantics v. Kripkenstein

- Millikan proposes we inherit (among other things) a mental organ for identifying things and kinds of things.
- A rule like, *use “horse” to mean horse* is merely a (true) generalization about the proper functioning of this hypothetical identification system.
- To answer Kripke’s demand for a straight solution: **The fact that makes the weird-horse-rule wrong** is that this weird use of “horse” is inconsistent with the kind of behavior that the substance-identifying structure evolved to enable.

Teleosemantics as a theory of meaning

- To develop a theory of meaning out of teleosemantics, we should propose that we have inherited a collection of language organs.
- Each of these enables some of our language skills.
- **The meaning of an utterance is determined by how the utterance is used by the relevant mental organ (and the use of the utterance by the mental organ is the proper function of that organ).**
- So, for example, the meaning of “gold” is determined by how our capability to identify substances makes use of this word.

Teleosemantics and Externalism

- Millikan's theory is radically externalist.
- We may not know what a structure evolved to do. We weren't there to see what benefit it gave our ancestors, after all. So, its function may be opaque to us.
- Millikan claims Putnam is only a quasi-externalist because he defended externalism by appealing to our intuitions about meaning. (Remember: Putnam asked us to agree to the intuition that "What is called 'water' on Earth is not what is called 'water' on twin Earth" was always true.)
- Real externalism would appeal to empirical facts, not conceptual analysis. In fact, externalism entails that intuitions or conceptual analysis are not reliable guides to meaning.

2. Verificationism

- The verificationists include A. J. Ayer
- They argued that all significant statements are either
 - Analytic or contradictory (e.g., they are logic); or
 - Can be tested by experience.
- The *semantic* version of this claim is that **the meaning of a statement S**
 - is the logical form of S, if S is a logical statement;
 - is the statement's empirical (testable) significance, for any other kind of sentence.
- A sentence that cannot be tested and is not pure logic is without (proper or significant) meaning.

3. Truth based theory

- In the 20th Century, Alfred Tarski introduced a way to model truth in logic
- This depends upon (what is now called) the T-biconditional: **“P” is true if and only if P**
- The truth based theory of meaning aims to make use of Tarski’s insight
- Donald Davidson is the major figure of this meaning theory

Using the T-Biconditional

- Davidson's proposal is that we want a range of things from our theory of meaning, including that it not take meaning as a primitive
- He proposes that truth can play this role.
- **The meaning of an utterance is determined by the truth conditions of that utterance.**
- To revise the T-biconditional: the meaning of an utterance "P" will be revealed by using a schema **"P" is true if and only if s**
- Here **s** will be an analysis of the truth conditions of the utterance **"P"**.
- For those of you familiar with logic: the hope is that an analysis in first-order-logic of the utterance **"P"** will show unique truth conditions, and therefore show the unique meaning.

Challenges for the Truth-Based Theory

1. Contradictions and paradoxes
2. Vagueness
3. Indexicals
4. Performative and expressive language
5. Possibility
6. Co-extensive predicates

Modifying the Truth-Based Theory

- An alternative is to modify the truth-based theory using a modal logic. Call this the modal-truth-based theory.
- The idea is:
 - The mean of a sentence is determined by the set of worlds in which the sentence is true.
 - The meaning of a predicate F is the sum of all possible extensions.
 - The meaning of a name t is determined by what t refers to in every world (there is disagreement about how to explain this)
- Thus, **the meaning of an utterance is determined by modal truth conditions of that utterance.**

This solves three of the challenges to the truth-based theory

1. Contradictions and paradoxes
2. Vagueness
- 3. Indexicals ✓**
4. Performative and expressive language
- 5. Possibility ✓**
- 6. Co-extensive predicates ✓**

The Use Theory of Meaning

- The Use theory is the least developed of the theories, though many find it the most compelling.
- The most important defender is the later Wittgenstein
- The view is that **the meaning of an utterance is determined by how the utterance is used.**
- Generally, the use theorists assume that there are many different uses of language, and that the traditional theories don't well capture them all. (E.g.: performative language is a kind of use that the truth based theory will not well explain.)

The theories we've seen

- Verificationist semantics: the meaning of an utterance is determined by its logical form if it is an utterance of logic; or the utterance's empirical (testable) significance, for any other kind of sentence.
- Truth-Based Theory: The meaning of an utterance is determined by the truth conditions of that utterance.
- Modal-Truth-Based Theory: the meaning of an utterance is determined by the modal truth conditions of that utterance.
- Use theory: the meaning of an utterance is determined by how the utterance is used.
- Biosemantics: The meaning of (the basic elements of) an utterance is determined by how the utterance is used by the relevant mental organ (and the use of the utterance by the mental organ is the proper function of that organ).