Lecture Three: *Reflections on the Nature of Language*

Philosophy 360
January 27, 2015

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I. **Administrative**

A. *Announcements:* No class on Thursday

B. *General Questions?*

II. **Language**

A. Language as an acquired characteristic of human beings
   1. Spoken first, then written
   2. Nature vs. nurture—what role genes, and what role culture?
   3. Might it have its place secured by its social role, a la grooming in chimpanzees?

B. Languages as varied forms of language
   1. Language is genetically determined, but allows for variability.
   2. Language is organic, varying with individuals and cultures.
   3. With geographical separation comes significant variation.
   4. The *taxonomic* idea—language families and languages.

C. What *exactly* is language? And how does this relate to languages?
   1. Language as *Internal:* language is a biological property of individual organisms, and so a property distributed across species to which we belong.
      a. Chomsky is a champion of this view, and he takes all other mention of language/s to be an abstraction from this.
b. **I-languages**: A system represented in the mind/brain, ultimately by physical mechanisms, and in this sense internalized; it is a particular characterization of a function that takes physical events and things and assigns status to them. These are real things and it is these that we should focus on in language study—language study becomes empirical science.

2. **Language as External**: language can be seen as a socially distributed medium of communication, or more abstractly, as a set of sentences taken to be pairs of phonological form and logical form.

   a. Lewis is a big proponent of this view. (See Lewis.) He takes language to be a medium of communication, i.e., a social phenomenon that is a part of the natural history of human beings; by contrast, a language is a formal system that assigns meanings to strings of sounds/symbols.

   b. **E-languages**: These are *extensional* or *externalized* languages, i.e., sets of objects that are external to individual speakers. For example, they could be the “totality of all utterances” or a set of sentence-meaning pairs, or a Platonic object.

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### III. Semantics

A. Semantics is the study of meaning. As philosophers, we will analyze concepts used in modeling meaning, and aim to build a theory of meaning (ToM).

B. What should a ToM look like? There are two broad approaches that we should consider here:

1. Lay bare the central semantic concepts and their interrelations, creating a conceptual framework for understanding semantic phenomena, a framework that can be used to structure empirical investigation.

2. Assign a meaning to every meaningful sentence in the language.
These are not mutually exclusive, but they represent different attitudes about the project in which we are engaged. Arguably, the first must be addressed before the second, as clarity about the central concepts will presumably be required before one can proceed to work out the details for a particular language. Alternatively, though, the latter as a goal can significantly constrain the types of conceptual analyses that are acceptable. It might be best to think of these as two theoretical moments in the development of semantics.

C. Specific Desiderata:

1. Formal Correctness:
   
   a. *Principle of Compositionality*: an acceptable ToM must “give an account of how the meanings of sentences depend upon the meanings of words” (Davidson). *Argument*: We learn languages, which is to say that we master a finite vocabulary and in the process acquire a capability that exhibits the property of “discrete infinity”; this would be an absolute mystery unless our capability exhibits the property of compositionality; thus, we must cleave to compositionality if we are to explain our ability to learn language.

   b. *Principle of the Relevance of Truth*: given that sentences express truths, an acceptable ToM must at least accommodate this; at most, it should explain how it is that truth relates to meaning, and why it is that sentences express truths. *And* it must avoid antinomies such as the liar.

2. Material Adequacy
   
   a. *Principle of Soundness*: an acceptable ToM must generate meanings for only the meaningful sentences in a language.

   b. *Principle of Completeness*: an acceptable ToM must generate meanings for all the meaningful sentences in a language.