Lecture Nine: What is a Theory of Meaning?
Philosophy 360
March 3, 2015

I. Administrative
   A. Reading essay #2 – due Friday by 5
   B. Readings for Thursday: Lycan, Ch. 6; Wittgenstein
   C. Questions?

II. Question #1: In general, what should a theory of meaning for natural language aim to do?
   A. You have had a chance to think about language for a while now – what would you want a theory of meaning for language to do?
   B. Keep in mind:
      1. Theories accommodate the data, explain, and predict
      2. Theories aim for explanatory adequacy in addition to descriptive and observational adequacy
   C. So what should explanatory adequacy look like for a theory of meaning?

III. Theoretical Interlude: Dummett on Theories of Meaning
   A. Semantic vs. meta-semantic theories of meaning:
      1. A semantic theory accounts for the meaning of a language – e.g., the semantics of English
      2. A meta-semantic theory accounts for aspects of semantic theories – e.g., an account of reference, truth, sense, cognitive significance
   B. Dummett is doing meta-semantics in this article, but in so doing is considering the question, “what form … should be taken by what is called
‘a theory of meaning’ for any one entire language” (428)?

1. In doing this, he addresses specifically the work of Donald Davidson, which is ahead of us a bit; given this, some of the detail will be bracketed.

2. Such a theory should yield a “specification of the meaning of every expression and sentence of the language” (428).

3. Details:
   a. M-sentences vs. T-sentences
   b. A ToM should also be a theory of understanding – we should go beyond knowing of a sentence that it is true to knowing the proposition expressed by the sentence.
   c. A ToM should “be able to distinguish between disagreements stemming from difference of interpretation and disagreements of substance (disagreements about the facts)” (440).

C. According to Dummett, a theory of meaning should be:

1. Full-blooded as opposed to modest
   a. Full-blooded: give the interpretation of the language to someone who does not have the requisite concepts – it “seeks actually to explain the concepts expressed by primitive terms of the language” (431).
   b. Modest: give the interpretation of the language to someone who already has the concepts.

2. Atomistic (or molecular) as opposed to holistic
   a. Atomistic: a theory according to which “each word has an individual meaning and each sentence an individual content” (438).
   b. Holistic: a theory that places only global constraints on the language as a whole – you don’t build it from the bottom up.

3. Rich as opposed to austere
   a. Rich: for names (e.g.) a rich theory “will attribute to a
speaker who understand the name a knowledge of the condition which must be satisfied by any object for it to be the bearer of the name” (442)

b. Auster: a theory of this sort will represent a speaker of the language as simply knowing of the referent that it is the referent

IV. Question #2: What are specific desiderata for a theory of meaning?

A. ‘Desiderata’ refers to those elements that one desires a theory of meaning to address.
   1. These supply conditions of adequacy on a theory
   2. A theory can meet these conditions either by accommodating and explaining a desideratum or by explaining it away

B. Lycan gives us these:
   1. What is the difference between meaningless and meaningful marks?
   2. Synonymy
   3. Ambiguity
   4. Entailment relations
   5. “Merely semantic”

C. In small groups, add to this list those items that you believe a theory of meaning should either explain or explain away