

Circulation and semantics

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The name Ferdinand de Saussure is, of course, well known in the humanities as the originator of a celebrated theory of signification which formed one of the foundations of the structuralist paradigm. Less well known is the name of one of Saussure's Parisian mentors, Michel Bréal. Bréal has been referred to as the 'institutional founder of linguistics in France' (Sanders 2004: 32): he was responsible for establishing the subject at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, he set up the first phonetics laboratory, and he was one of the luminaries of the Paris Linguistic Society, with which Saussure was closely associated. For our purposes, Bréal's importance lies in his 1897 book *Essai de sémantique*, the work to which the first usage of the term 'semantics' is generally attributed. This book was not simply devoted to the study of meaning, although meaning occupied a central place in it. It also dealt with many aspects of language, including technical linguistic questions like those of 'transitivity', auxiliaries and noun-compounding, the question of the scientificity of linguistics, and the importance of the 'subjective element' in language. One of Bréal's main purposes in the *Essai* was to rehabilitate the notion that 'human will' (*la volonté humaine*) is a motivating force in the understanding of language, and he devoted considerable efforts to the task of articulating the various psychological principles which he believed were at work in language and which he thought governed, among other things, word meaning: 'Les lois que j'ai essayé d'indiquer étant plutôt d'ordre psychologique,' he wrote, 'je ne doute pas qu'elles ne se vérifient hors de la famille indo-européenne' (Bréal 1897: 8).

The fact that Bréal chose the name 'Semantics' for what in many ways is actually a work of general linguistics tells us something about the central place he saw the study of meaning occupying within the discipline. If we consider linguistics as the investigation of the relation between form and meaning, it seems clear that neither term of that relation can be ignored while remaining true to the spirit of the discipline. But one of the paradoxical legacies of Saussurean ideas in linguistics was precisely that the centrality of

meaning stressed by Bréal was effaced, and the meaningfulness of language came, amazingly, to be seen as rather peripheral to the main concerns of the subject. This isn't the occasion to trace the eclipsing of meaning as a central object of linguistic research in the twentieth century. The story involves developments in analytic philosophy (logical positivism) and psychology (behaviourism), as well as in the structuralist heritage of linguistics itself. But this eclipsing entailed the disappearance of the rich tradition of semantic analysis represented by Bréal's book, or by Ogden and Richards' *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923).¹ Each of these was, in its own way, anthropologically, socially and psychologically informed, and each had its own distinctive place in the discipline's early impetus to 'make the study of language nearly coextensive with the study of all human behaviour' — an impetus identified by Max Black (1968: 11). That, however, was then. It's the eclipsing of this rich social-anthropological tradition by subsequent and largely formalist developments in linguistics and elsewhere which explains why many people with a passing interest in questions of language have heard of Gottlob Frege, the celebrated philosopher of mathematics whose ideas about meaning were immensely influential on linguistic thought, but have never heard of Bréal, who was Frege's slightly older contemporary.

That, then, is by way of gloss on the 'semantics' part of the my title. Now for circulation. The term 'circulation' is not widely used in linguistics, though etymologically related notions like 'circuit' are among the metaphors which Saussure popularized to express the interchange between the archetypal speaker and hearer, the figures whose interaction is taken in the discipline as a model for linguistic interactions of every kind, whether spoken, signed or written. Now, we don't in fact have to accept that any interchange between speaker and hearer does take place in the speech situation: stripped bare, what happens in the speech situation is that the speaker uses their lungs to create some distortions in the ambient air which cause the hearer's eardrums to vibrate, an event which seems ill-suited to the model of an interchange in which something changes hands.

¹ I have identified Bréal and Ogden and Richards as examples of a similar tendency in linguistic thought, but it shouldn't be forgotten that the latter's regard for the former was by no means unqualified: see Ogden and Richards (1949: vi, 2–3).

Granting, though, that it can be useful to conceive of the speech event as an interchange, we need to ask what this something is that's changing hands. For most of the more than two thousand year history of Western reflection on language, it has seemed, to thinkers as far apart as Aristotle and Locke, as well as to any number of twentieth century linguists, that it is ideas which are changing hands — or, more appropriately, changing minds. Words and language exist to carry ideas, as their meanings, from one speaker to another. A word or a sentence's meaning, then can, in general, be said to be the idea to which it corresponds, and it's the circulation of ideas which language enables. Speaker becomes hearer and hearer becomes speaker, but the meanings which circulate between them stay, in some sense, the same.

To an audience immersed in the present intellectual habits of universities, this model of linguistic interaction may well seem simplistic in the extreme. A succession of critical movements in the academy has accustomed us to be suspicious both of teleological claims to the effect that the function of language is the transmission of ideas, and of simple-minded assertions about the relation between language and thought. But what I'd like to emphasise is how hard it is to eradicate the basic idea of a connection between words and ideas if we want our theories of language to do what we need them to do. Many of those sympathetic to the Derridean critique of Saussure, for example, and to its associated wide-ranging claims, still retain a belief in what we might think of as the literal, denotative or referential function of language: the fact that the word *dog* literally refers to a dog, and that *hit* basically refers to the act of hitting. It's hard, indeed, to see how we could dispense with these ideas about the meanings of words without losing our point of entry into the metalinguistic universe. If we want to suggest that JG Ballard, for example, uses the image of an abandoned aerodrome as a metaphor for the desolation of contemporary society, we'd better have an idea of the basic or literal meaning of the phrase 'abandoned aerodrome' on which to base our assessment of its metaphorical transformations. We need to know, in other words, that the phrase refers to a certain type of place — small, deserted landing fields and their associated buildings. To put it differently again, we need to know the definition of the literal meanings of the words *abandoned* and *aerodrome*. And the most obvious and compelling way in which the

legitimacy of definitions has been maintained in the history of Western reflection on language has been by saying that definitions correspond to concepts or ideas. Furthermore, these ideas or concepts are typically thought of as transpersonal: as speakers of English, we all more or less share the *same* concepts *deserted* and *aerodrome*. Because of this commonality, genuine communication can take place: we genuinely can exchange ideas, since the words with which we express them are themselves the reflections of shared concepts. The same basic concepts, on this picture, circulate – in different combinations – throughout the speech community.

There are a number of models in linguistics which set out to explain the process by which this circulation takes place. The main demarcating line among them is the extent to which context is taken to be an active partner in the circulation of semantic content. For so-called pragmatic theories of meaning, only a subpart of the meanings understood by the hearer actually come from the words spoken by the hearer. Thus, consider a short conversation between two colleagues, Peter and Mary, which might be spoken in the corridor of a university department (the example adapted from Sperber and Wilson 2002: 19):

Peter: Can we trust John to do as we tell him and defend the interests of the University in front of the Minister?

Mary: John is a soldier!

Quite clearly, Mary doesn't mean that John is a member of the armed forces. She means that John is a reliable stalwart who can be trusted to fight for the university's interests. How does this meaning arise? For someone committed to the pragmatic paradigm, it arises by inference. Peter knows that the basic meaning of the word *soldier* is 'member of the terrestrial armed forces'. When Mary uses it, this is the meaning which is subconsciously called to mind. He realizes that Mary can't be talking literally – John's an academic, not a soldier – and he uses his knowledge of the qualities of soldiers – reliability, courage, strength, and so on – to infer the intended meaning of Mary's words. Noting the discrepancy between Mary's words and reality, he resolves it by using his

knowledge of soldiers to interpret Mary's meaning non-literally. This sort of thinking about meaning in context is the result of a tradition of research encompassing figures like John Austin (1962), John Searle (1969), HP Grice (1989), and Dan Sperber and Deidre Wilson (1987).

The alternative to this picture would be simply to say that soldier can *mean* something like 'reliable defender of a group's interests'. That solution may seem inoffensive in this instance, but as a general policy it's disastrous. Because of the extreme fluidity of language, any word can mean anything. To give an example due to Ronald Langacker, the sentence *the cat is on the mat* could be used to refer to the knock-out in the boxing ring of a boxer wearing a tigerskin. A comprehensive description of word meaning would therefore have to credit every word of a language with every meaning, and our intuitions about the distinctness of meaning would go out the window. Pragmatic theories of meaning allow you to avoid this unfortunate outcome by reducing the amount of meaning content that needs to circulate between speakers, as well as to explain apparent discrepancies between a word's literal meaning and its actual meaning in context.

I hope I've given some idea of the complexities that arise from an attempt to see communication as the circulation of ideas. I mentioned Bréal (1897), Saussure (1916), and Ogden and Richards (1923) as important figures in the tradition of linguistic semantics that I find most interesting, and the names of Austin (1962), Searle (1969), Grice (1989) and Sperber and Wilson (1987) as important in the pragmatic side of that tradition.

I suggested earlier that we don't have to accept the idea that an interchange between speaker and hearer does actually take place, and I'd like to end by considering an alternative model of language which dispenses with the notion that communication consists in the circulation of concepts. This approach isn't taken very seriously in mainstream linguistics; in fact, it's barely ever mentioned, even though it constitutes, in my view, the most viable alternative paradigm. It's due essentially to Ludwig Wittgenstein, and it can be suggested, as Wittgenstein himself suggests it, through an

analogy with money (cf. Wittgenstein 2001: §120). Just as a unit of currency like a five dollar note has a certain value or buying power which is correlated with a particular quantity of goods or services in the world, so a word can be said to have a value – its meaning or force – which is also correlated with objects or particular configurations of objects in the world. Thus, in a shop that sells nuts, a five dollar note can be exchanged for a certain quantity of nuts – a different quantity from the one that could be bought for fifty dollars, or for five cents. In a similar way, words can also be ‘exchanged’ for things in the world. If I specify that I want peanuts by saying the words “peanuts, please”, the events that ensue in the world are different from the events that ensue if I say “pecans, please”, “walnuts, please”, or “nothing today, thank you”. In the case of money, there is clearly no such thing as the underlying ‘concept’ or ‘idea’ of five dollars, which could be paraphrased or defined in a fixed and determinate way, and which fixes the quantity of goods and services with which this amount is correlated in a general sense. Even though in any one transaction the amount of five dollars has a fairly narrow range of possible applications, a narrow range of things it can buy – applications which buyers certainly remember and appeal to in order to assess any future proposed price – its value is determined not by any explicitly storable inherent ‘content’ or determinate underlying ‘idea’ associated with the unit of five dollars, but, ultimately, by the intentions of the people using it: if I want something badly enough, I will spend more than I otherwise would, and if the vendor wants to sell something badly enough, they will be prepared to discount it strongly.

The buying power or value of five dollars thus varies from one transaction to another, depending on the precise nature of the commercial relation involved, the nature of the wider economy, and, in particular, on how good the vendor and the buyer are in their respective roles. Nor does five dollars have a fixed value of the sort that could be specified by ‘translation’, so to speak, into another currency: the value of five Australian dollars in Euros or Solomon Island dollars depends on exactly the sort of micro- and macro- interactions that govern its exchange for things in the world. A currency is thus a system which symbolizes value by correlating ‘referents’ in the world (broadly speaking, commodities) with abstract units of worth. Even though, however, these units have

certain minimal structural properties (five dollars is five times the value of one dollar, and one tenth the value of fifty), none has any inherently defined value associated with it: what a piece of currency can be exchanged for emerges out of its use in transactions, and no explanation of these transactions would be viable that took as basic a notion that specified 'the (unchanging, determinate) value of five dollars'.

Language, on this view, might also lack fixed and determinate meanings which circulate from one speaker to another. It can be thought of as lacking any explicit content, whether mental or otherwise, that determines what words refer to, what they may be exchanged for. In this perspective, a word's meaning on any one occasion is the result of a (very) complex set of micro- and macro-systemic factors, but, just like the value of money, this meaning should not be seen as grounded in any absolute content, determinate idea, or fixed representation, but as variable and negotiated by participants in the course of language use. Adopting this picture of meaning poses formidable descriptive problems and robs us of the ability to generalize about what a given word 'means'; but it allows avoids many of the deep problems encountered by theories of semantics which are wedded to the notion of words expressing ideas.

I've sketched three different approaches to the idea of circulation in semantics. The basic assumption in most theorizing about language over the past two hundred years has been that language is an instrument which conveys ideas: it's ideas which circulate through language. The pragmatic approach to meaning manages to reduce the number of ideas which we need to postulate as being in circulation by distinguishing between the idea literally expressed by a word, and those inferred by the word's use in a particular context. Lastly, the Wittgensteinian approach to the problem of meaning refuses to see anything in circulation at all: language is a complex of social practices, and it's mistaken to look for meanings inside it.

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