The Multiplicity of Meaning

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Semantic Pluralism

- What is semantic pluralism?

  - Face-value: Expressions have a multiplicity of meanings, i.e. more than one meaning

- "Another unfortunate consequence of conceptual stretch is that class means different things for different people. There is nothing necessarily wrong in this semantic pluralism, as long as it does not lead scholars to talk past each other."—Lee and Turner, The Meaning of Class: Conceptual Stretch & Semantic Pluralism

- "Ontology research in the social sciences has highlighted the need to represent differing conceptualisations of reality without specifying a single set of definitions as the correct one (semantic pluralism)." — Kennedy, Semantic Pluralism for Collaborative Model Development

- "According to semantic pluralism, a syntactically plural term is semantically plural in that it denotes many entities at once." —Florio, The semantics of plurals: A defense of singularism

- "My thesis aims to defend Semantic Pluralism, the idea that many terms of interest to the philosophy of language ('truth', 'reference', 'meaning') individually admit of multiple incompatible analyses."
—Will Gamester, Leeds.

Semantic Pluralism I

- First version: Expressions are ambiguous (or: polysemous; context-dependent? semantically changing?).

  - 'bank', 'book', …

  - Roughly: expressions stand in the same meaning relation to two different semantic values.

Semantic Pluralism II

- Semantic Pluralism II: Expressions (in general) have different *sorts* of meaning

  - Russellian, Fregean, possible-worlds, centered worlds; structured, unstructured; static, dynamic; truth-conditional, non-truth-conditional; …

- I.e. there are multiple semantic relations between expressions and semantic values

Semantic Pluralism III

- There are many things than 'meaning' can mean.

  - One shouldn't fix on any single thing (e.g. truth-conditionality, compositionality, publicity) as the sine qua non of true meaning.

Three Sorts of Thesis

- The first is a semantic thesis.

- The second is a metasemantic thesis.

- The third is a metametasemantic thesis?

Semantic Functionalism

- It's natural to put these theses in terms of semantic functionalism: the thesis that meanings are whatever play the meaning role.

Semantic Pluralism

- 1. The meaning role is played roughly equally well by many different entities

- 2. There are many different meaning roles, with different entities (or relations) playing them.

- 3. All of these roles can reasonably be called "meaning roles".

Housework

- "My taste is for keeping open house for all sorts of conditions of entities, just so long as when they come in they help with the housework." — Grice 1975

What Are the Meaning Roles?

- Explananda of semantics?

- [Broad/concrete] Behavior and mental states of speakers and hearers?

- [Narrow/abstract] Truth, entailment, etc.

- [Intermediate] Speakers' judgments of truth, entailment, appropriateness, cognitive significance, …

Criteria for Being Semantic

- What makes a relation between linguistic entities and other entities a *semantic* relation?

- E.g. in debates over semantics vs pragmatics

1. Convention

- 1. Being associated with an expression (type) in virtue of the conventions of a language.

- [vs e.g. being associated with an utterance of an expression, in virtue of …]

II. Truth-Conditionality

- Meanings are truth-conditions or entities that explain truth-conditions. [or: satusfaction-conditions?]

- [vs e.g. implicatures, cognitive roles, …]

III. Compositionality

- Semantic values must be compositional (values of complex expressions determined by values of parts).

Strongest Version

- Semantic content is (i) conventional, (ii) compositional, (iii) truth-conditional.

- Problem: no semantic values satisfy (i)-(iii) in general, as what's compositional isn't truth-conditional and vice versa (Rabern…)

- Fallback: semantic values are (i) conventional, (ii) compositional, (iii) determine truth-conditions [content]

My view

- All of these are interesting constraints to impose for certain purposes.

- None of them is a sine qua non for being a semantic value broadly construed.

- The question of which is really required for being semantic is a verbal issue.

Two-Dimensionalism and Semantic Pluralism

- Two-dimensionalism associated many abstract values with expressions and their utterances

  - primary intensions, secondary intensions

  - two-dimensional intensions

  - structured primary intensions, …

  - enriched intensions…

Two-Dimensional Pluralism

- All of these are semantic values (broadly construed) of expressions or utterances

- None is *the* meaning or semantic value

- Though one (the enriched intension) can arguably subsume all the others [a step toward semantic monism?]

Are 2D Intensions Semantic?

- Conventional? No. E.g. different utterances of the same name can have different primary intensions.

- Truth-conditional? Maybe. Intensions are truth-conditions and determine truth-values of complex sentences.

- Compositional? Maybe. 2D Intensions can help give compositional account of …

Sine Qua Non?

- But even if 2D intensions weren't truth-conditional and weren't compositional, they could still be semantic broadly construed, e.g. in virtue of helping to explain cognitive significance of utterances.

- Some other Fregean theories may be semantic in this sense without being "semantic" in any of three central senses.

Explain Everything?

- Also: there's much that 2D intensions don't explain. [E.g. context-dependence, fine-grained epistemic phenomena, some dynamic phenomena, relativistic phenomena…]

- Expressions/utterances certainly have other semantic values that can help explain those.

- n-dimensionalism? Fine-grained senses? …

Semantic Monism 1

- Semantic Monism 1: There's one role which is the role associated with 'meaning' or 'semantics' [e.g. conventional, compositional, truth-conditional], and this is played by one sort of entity:

Semantics vs Content

- E.g. maybe in much of contemporary linguistics and philosophy of language it's definitional that semantics is conventional

- Then context-variable utterance properties will be non-semantic: contents or pragmatic or epistemic values…

Semantics vs Content II

- But then: much of traditional interest re "meaning" (e.g. truth-conditions, what is said, …) may turn out to be non-semantic (cf. semantic minimalism)

- Also: there will almost certainly remain a plurality of entities that are semantic in the narrow sense.

Semantic Pluralism re 'Semantic'

- My view: 'Semantic' and 'Meaning' have many semantic values and many meanings!

Semantic Monism II

- Semantic Monism II: One role is the most important role.

- Response: Surely importance of roles depends on one's purposes.

Semantic Monism III

- Yes, there are many semantic values, but one is the most fundamental, in that all the others can be derived from it.

- Response: I'm highly skeptical, except perhaps for extremely complex values that build in many of the others (and even if true, the others are still semantic values).

Semantic Monism IV

- There are many ways to associate values with linguistic entities, but only one has a deep psychological reality.

- Response: I'm skeptical that the psychology of language is so neat. It probably can be modeled in many ways with many different sorts of values. [and: psychological reality is just another negotiable constraint!]

What are the Substantive Questions

- Which values/relations have which properties and play which explanatory roles? [No need for 'semantic' here.]

- Which roles are the important roles for understanding language?

Content Pluralism

- The same issues arise in the philosophy of mind regarding the content of mental states such as beliefs

  - multiple sorts of content

    - narrow/wide, Russellian/Fregean/worlds/centered, …

  - playing multiple content roles

What's the Content?

- There's no single clear issue concerning which of these is *the* content of a mental state.

- As with meaning, there are multiple notions of content with different constraints corresponding to different explanatory roles

Psychological Reality?

- Perhaps it could turn out that some sort of content has a deeper psychological reality, e.g. by being built into the fundamental structure of mentality.

- But it's not clear why one should believe this, especially if one is not a primitivist about intentional states.

Recommendation

- My recommendation: cast debates about semantics without using 'semantic' and debates about content without using 'content'.

- Some disagreements will dissolve, others will be clarified.

Concluding Question

- What really deep/fundamental questions in the philosophy of language will be left?