

Titel: What sort of things are meanings?, [NChristensen] 022-0010

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WHAT SORT OF THINGS ARE MEANINGS?

In connection with Professor Ayer's stimulating report on the present status of the problem of meaning, I want to propose one more answer to this problem. My suggestions will consist in giving a new twist to the theory of objective meanings towards which Ayer apparently has some inclinations, though he ends up with a different, behavioral account of meaning.

The meaning of x - when x means or is a sign of y - is what is correlated with x when x might rightly be produced when and where and only when and where there is a non-linguistic y of any kind, be it an object, property, relation, fact, or anything else. (For lack of space we disregard the exceptional cases where linguistic expressions are themselves talked about.) This purely abstract, unperceivable entity is, I shall argue, the "thing" sought by Ayer and other analytic philosophers when raising, in Quine's words, the general question that forms the title of my address. Nevertheless this thing or entity, though abstract, is not particularly complicated or mysterious; in many respects it might profitably be compared to an office or a job, and the relation between sign and meaning correspondingly to the relation between office-holder and office.

For illustration we prefer a sentence of the simplest kind, viz. the nominal sentence "Rain!" uttered by someone when seeing or hearing that the rain is pouring down. Evidently it is quite possible to observe both the sound-complex "rain" and the rain and even that these occur together without understanding the meaning of "rain", or that it has a meaning at all. The necessary logical condition for such an understanding seems to be that it is realized that "rain" occurs as it does rightly, by way of convention. Similarly a person might sweep the street though we do not understand that it is his "office" or job to do so; not until we grasp that he acts in an official capacity do we know that he has a certain "office". If we generalise this, the meaning of a sound-complex is not its use as a person's office is not what he does; nor is it what he does rightly, but something lying behind, entailing to these actions, and correspondingly the meaning is not the right use, but what justifies this use. Last but not least, the right use in question is not the right use together with some other sound-complex or sign, but together with something else that is not a sign as the pouring rain was not. In fact, meanings seem to be just the sort of things suggested.^{x)}

Now we have in logic and philosophy a particular term to indicate that a sentence is used rightly. When the nominal sentence consisting of the expression "rain" is actually produced when and where one observes the rain, we shall say that the statement made is true in Tarski's famous sense of this predicate, although we ordinarily use far more suggestive equivalents such as "right" and "correct". Since that is so, and since the right use of a sentence-sign corresponds to the function of an office-holder, we derive the important result that meaning stands to truth as office to function: to have meaning is to be capable of being true. Obviously this result will only be applicable in a modified form to signs or expressions that do not have complete meaning as sentences have.

^{x)} To prevent a serious objection I should like to emphasize that it does not follow from my proposal that an expression has meaning only if it is produced together with its corresponding object. The expression has the right of this occurrence even if the object, in the extreme case, does not exist.

On the other hand one should not immediately think that it covers only concrete expressions, because the illustrative example was concrete, probably it will work also for abstract expressions, though perhaps less smoothly.

The theory proposed satisfies Ayer's demand for not identifying the meaning of a word with the object it might refer to, and the meaning of a sentence with the fact it might be true about. For the office-like meaning that justifies the production of a certain sound-complex when some specific non-linguistic entity is present is logically wholly independent of the existence of this entity. From a genetic point of view unanalysable, simple terms like "red" may have acquired their meaning only when the particular object was present, i.e. only when ostensively defined, but evidently the red colour might now disappear from the world though "red" will not thereby lose its meaning. Even the meaning of a proper name cannot, as Ayer points out in contrast to other current views, be identified with its bearer. Indeed, according to our theory proper names would appear to have meaning very much like other linguistic signs.

We can also join Ayer in rejecting the most common view of meanings that take them to be mental images or ideas. Whatever these problematic entities might be, they apparently must be similar to the objects they are images or ideas of, at least in some respects. But the abstract entity correlated with "rain" when this sound-complex might rightly occur only when and where it is raining do not have any properties similar to the rain. Let us note that this agrees well with recent trends in general epistemology; neither in the analysis of meaning do we need ghostly, duplicate entities in the mind. Whether meanings could be concepts, then, in some suitable, highly abstract sense of "concept" is a more difficult question. Its answer might turn out to be dependent on our position with respect to offices; if offices are concepts, so are meanings, but apparently not otherwise. Nevertheless all theories of the image-kind bring home a point we must never forget: meanings are mind-dependent in a way physical things are not, but offices are.

The analogy with offices should, in general, considerably help empirically-minded philosophers in accepting meanings as entities of the kind proposed. Let us grant to Ayer that much of what has been said concerning objective meanings and their existence "puts too heavy a strain on one's credulity". But who will deny that offices exist in a rather simple, unmetaphysical sense, even if we cannot point to them on account of their abstract character? At least no problem of "office" as difficult and persistent as the problem of meaning has ever found its way into the literature. So we may depend on such a thing for some philosophical clarification.

The meaning is immediately seen to be an independent entity that is different from the sound-complex that bears it, the sign or expression, as the office is different from the person holding it. Another arbitrary sound-complex may come to have the same meaning, and the same sound-complex another meaning, as is well known. What "rain" means is thus expressed differently in various languages, and what is common for all these expressions, their meaning, is simply that they all might rightly occur only together with the rain. Similarly two office-holders holding the same office in two different countries are entitled to act in the same way. Apparently a meaning might also be vacant, even if we cannot tell

which particular one is in question without, as it were, filling out the vacancy. Further a meaning is objective in the same sense as an office. Evidently such things "may be the common property of many", to quote Frege. If, on the other hand, by "objective" is meant independent of consciousness, meanings are not objective as pointed out earlier.

Moreover Ayer objects against theories of objective meanings that they explain nothing. With respect to explanatory power I shall be inclined, however, to hold the present theory comparable to any.

1. We are furnished with a three-fold distinction between the occurrence of a sound-complex (or anything else that might be used as sign material) as mere sound-complex, as sound-complex with meaning or expression, but "off duty", i.e. not referring or not being true, and as expression in function, i.e. referring or being true. We meet the first kind of occurrence when, for instance, we define a new term, or someone asks us what so and so means. Obviously he must know the sound-complex well enough to produce it; what he does not know is how it might rightly be produced. The second kind of occurrence corresponds fairly well to Frege's oblique use of a name, and Quine's similar concept of not purely referential occurrence.^{x)} Only I should emphasise against Frege that an expression must have the very same sense or meaning in a non-referential as in a referential occurrence. Among examples of the former kind we might mention questions, commands, or, in general, occurrences within so-called intensional contexts, whereas examples of referential or functional occurrence comprise the cases where an expression and its corresponding object occur together. This is to say that the function or right use of an expression is very limited; thus to use an expression for a command will not be its right use according to this special terminology, which might be well worth remembering.

2. The logic of definitions and other meaning explanations stands out clearly. To describe a particular office is equivalent to describing the function or functions characteristic of this office. Similarly the meaning of a sound-complex is described by its function, i.e. by specification of the non-linguistic something it might rightly occur together with. Consequently the meaning of "rain" can only be described and distinguished from the meaning of "snow" and all other expressions either by use of "rain" itself or by some synonymous expression. Nevertheless we do not want to imply that it is raining when we say that "pluie" in French means rain; nor is it more difficult to explain the meaning of "snow is black" than of "snow is white". We achieve the purpose of the explanation without such assertive implications by producing or exhibiting expressions that have the same meaning as *explonandum*, but we do not let them function, we let them occur non-referentially. Such non-functioning though meaningful expressions will generally occur to the right of "means", "means the same as", or another similar phrase. On the left hand we also have an exhibition, but this time of a mere sound- or letter-complex as suggested above. But if, in accordance with ordinary logical practice, we put such a complex between single quotation marks, we do not form a name of something as most logicians tend to believe; we just indicate that we are directly producing a complex

x) Frege's referential occurrence, on the other hand, appears to be broader than mine.

that might elsewhere occur in different capacities. The whole procedure can, for illustration, be compared to the following: we present a person and say that he holds or is going to hold the same office as another office-holder whom we also present and whose office we know.

Since the meaning of particular expressions are thus always given by synonymous expressions, it follows that no meaning can be explained without explicit or implicit reference, in a loose sense of this word, to other meanings that it is logically dependent upon. Therefore neither logical stenism nor any other reductionistic view can be a consequence or a tacit assumption of our theory of meaning. Along with the point just made this theory should also enable us to better understand the ostensive learning of language that cannot be denied to be necessary. We learn the meaning of some expressions only if we watch them functioning or occurring together with particular observable objects, presuming that these occurrences are official. On the other hand we are not able, of course, to watch or point to the very meanings themselves. Further the concrete observations are probably possible only within some abstract theoretical framework, so the expressions mentioned cannot, in any immediate sense, be said to form the basis of our language.

3. "There can be no general answer to the question what do words, or sentences, mean, for the very good reason that they do not all mean the same". Ayer now admits that this important argument (which has also been used by him before against meanings as relational, objective terms) "does not go quite far enough". It seems to derive its force from the apparent fact that a general and a particular description of the same meaning are always logically incompatible. If, for instance, meanings are concepts, the expression "concept of rain" describes another meaning than the expression "rain". Our view of meanings should, however, give to us a hint why these entities behave differently from all other things known. The *raison d'être* of the description of the meaning of some particular word is that we should be able to use the word for referring to a certain non-linguistic object. But whether we prepare such a use or actually indulge in it, we cannot include anything that would make the word alien to its purpose; "rain" means rain and nothing else. But this does not prevent that the very same meaning has something in common with all other meanings when we do not describe it for the purpose of individual use, but theorize about it in general terms. Only because we deal with the same entity in these different ways, using the same expression, and misleadingly calling both descriptions, too, anomaly results.

4. It will be clear how most, if not all, use of language presuppose the fact-stating use, even if it is not fact-stating itself. Let us illustrate by considering the much debated problem on the meaning of commands. It is generally admitted that a grammatically indicative sentence like "Now you close that door" may be used now for an assertion, now for a command. That a sentence often has a different grammatical appearance in these two capacities seems logically unimportant as long as it does not necessarily have. Now commands certainly cannot be said to be true or false. From this together with misapprehensions of the relation of meaning and truth some philosophers have then concluded that the sentence mentioned must have a wholly different meaning, representative or

otive, according to its use. Of course, the truth is that it has the very same meaning in both uses, which has not passed by unnoticed, e.g. by Bare in his "Language of Morals". But this correct view has been lacking the theoretical support it needs from an adequate functional view of meaning. To use "Now you close that door" for a command might naturally be compared to presenting an office-holder that is off duty and indicate that we want him to function. Everybody that knows his office will understand what we want. In exactly the same way, everybody that knows the meaning of the sentence will understand what we want, namely that it will come true that the person addressed close that door. From this simple example it should be evident how we might use a sentence in countless different ways that are not, strictly speaking, right uses, but also evident how all these uses logically presuppose the meaning and thus the function or right use, the use to make truths and state facts. It should be noted that we might similarly explain, *mutatis mutandis*, how we can understand false sentences and sentences about past and distant events, in general, expressions that are not functioning in the proper sense.

Before concluding a few brief remarks on relations to kindred earlier theories. As it has been one of the tenets of some recent Oxford Philosophy that meanings are jobs, one might well wonder if the present theory is not simply a new variant of this deserving view that makes meanings into the sort of things they apparently are. However, besides being perhaps more explicit we differ from the functional approach of the Oxford "school" in two decisive respects. First, we definitely find that there is a relation between sign and meaning; thereby we make room for meanings as objective and independent entities in agreement with the views of Frege and Church. Second, by giving attention to the rights connected with a job or office we relate meaning to truth in accordance with one particularly important aspect of Logical Empiricism. But it is only by taking this relation to be analogous with that between office and function that we get a precise understanding of its nature; on the other hand, if the function of the meaning job is not analysed out as that of being true, the analogy might be more misleading than instructive, as is easily the related comparison of language with chess, so popular with Wittgenstein and Hyle. Thus it would seem that elements from three main trends in modern analysis of meaning, namely Oxford Philosophy, Frege-Church Realism, and Logical Empiricism, merge into one, if the theory here presented, in a rough and preliminary outline, can stand closer examination.

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In connection with Professor Ayer's report a theory is suggested that takes the meaning of x - when x means y - to be what is correlated with x when x might rightly be produced only when and where there is a non-linguistic y of any kind. This entity though independent and abstract is not particularly mysterious, but in many respects comparable to an office. Since for a sign to occur rightly is the same as to be true, it follows that to have meaning is to be capable of being true. We also see why the meaning of an expression cannot be its corresponding object, nor a mental image or idea. Further the theory explains that (1) we have a three-fold distinction between mere sound-complex, expression that is "off duty" or does not refer, and expression that does function or refer; (2) a meaning explanation is given by producing a mere sound-complex and then some synonymous expression that does not refer; (3) a general and a particular description of the same meaning appear to be logically incompatible; (4) most, if not all, use of language presuppose the fact-stating use. Elements from Oxford Philosophy, Frege-Church Realism, and Logical Empiricism unite in the present theory.