

Titel: Semantics. Scope, Definitions, Methods, [Nice1951] 046-0620

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A.W. de Groot:

SEMANTICS

SCOPE, DEFINITIONS, METHODS.

If this conference is going to be a conference on SEMANTICS, the first question to be answered will be what we understand by "semantics". I understand that we have to deal exclusively, or primarily with vocal speech and language, and more especially with the problem of meanings.

The study of meanings has two, and only these two aspects: (1) meanings in language, i.e. the study of the meanings of significant of a given language (or more than one language), the significant being: words, parts or elements of words, combinations of words (a black swan, a white crow), sentence intonations; and parts or elements of sentence intonations (Yes, but does he know?). (2) meanings in the use of a language, i.e. speech; this is the study of the use made of meanings of significant in actual speech, or, better, the use made of significant as far as this use is determined by their meanings.

2. In order to study meanings we don't need a perfectly satisfactory definition of "meaning" any more than e.g. mathematicians need a definition of a point and a line to build up the science of geometry.

At least at the first stage, maybe in all following stages, the only thing we need is a more or less provisional agreement on what we mean by "the meaning of a word" or any other significant: So we need a kind of ostensive definition. Cp. my Structurele Syntaxis, 1949, 161; W.E. Johnson, Logic I, and L. Susan Stebbing, A Modern Introduction to Logic, 2nd ed., 1933, p. 423.

We may start from the assumption (hypothesis) that a word (the term word is here used loosely to denote any or several types of significant) has a meaning, and that this meaning is something different from "things" or "somethings" in the so-called practical world around us (supposed, or denied, or fictional reality). By means of the use of a word in a given situation a speaker may refer to one or more of such "things". This assumption may be based - among other things - on the following observations.

a. The same "something in reality" may be referred to by different words having different meanings; a girl may be referred to by the use of the words Jane, She, girl, president, darling, cat, beauty, perfection, angel, etc.

b. The same word (in language), i.e. words having the same form (marks) and the same meaning (in speech) may be used to refer to different "somethings in reality". This can cause ambiguities. Using the word cat the speaker may leave his audience in doubt which cat he is referring to: a cat in the room, or on the roof, his own cat, his neighbour's; or even whether he refers to an animal or a woman. The word used by the speaker, or its meaning, is a clue to the something he is referring to. This clue has to be used by the hearer in order to identify the something referred to.