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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 extensive definition. Cp. my Structurele Syntaxis, 1949, 161; W.E. Johnson, Logic I, ans 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.

3. The study of meanings is one of the most essential parts of the study of a language, consequently of linguistics. Linguistics is here used to denote the study of speech and languages. A significant is - to use a term of Roman Jakobson's - bipartite. This does not mean, of course, that it has two parts, but it means that a significant is an indivisible unit of form and meaning. The form is a collection or combination of marks. Form and meaning of a significant are correlative. A form (of a significant) is a form of, or for a definite meaning. A meaning is a meaning of a definite form. To study forms of significant without taking into account their meanings as such, is a theoretical contradiction, and practically impossible. Cp. f.i. Kenneth L. Pike, Grammatical prerequisites to phonemic analysis. Word 3, 155-72 (1947).

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It should be kept in mind, however, that such terms as word, morpheme, phrase, sentence, often are used to refer to the form of a word, a morpheme, etc.

4. A language may be called a system of significant in that it is both a system of symbol (i.e. significant) forms, and of symbol meanings.

System of word forms :

son, sun - cup  
sin kin kip  
soon - coon  
seen keep coop  
 etc.

System of word marks :  
 (phonemes:)

p t k  
 b d g  
 m n ng

etc.

System of word meanings :

son daughter  
PARENTS  
father mother  
grandfather grandmother  
GRANDCHILD  
grandson granddaughter  
uncle aunt  
man wife  
CHILD  
boy girl  
 etc.

night day  
 (morning, afternoon,  
evening)  
day, week, month, year,  
 etc.

5. The meaning of a word or any other significant is not a feature common to all the situations in which the word is used or may be used. The speaker may choose a wrong word. He may use it to refer to something that is not covered by the meaning of the word, e.g. when he refers to the stars by the eyes of night. The feeling tone of a word like pig is part of its meaning, but it is absent in many situations. It may be asked whether the meaning of a word has anything to do with the situation in cases where the speaker refers to the form of the significant itself, e.g. the genitive of the second declension in Latin has the phoneme -i. It depends on what we understand by the situation.

It may be that K. Kuipers is right in maintaining that the only feature common to all situations in which a word is used is the presence of the word itself.

Such facts as the possibility of referring to an animal, as well as to a lady or a girl, or to the word cat as such, i.e. as a unit of sound and meaning, a significant (The word cat has three phonemes.), by using the word cat; or of referring to a part of the body of an animal as well as to a part of a ship, or to the word eye as such, suffice to prove that the meaning of a significant is not the common feature to all situations in which the significant may be effectively used, i.e. so that the hearer is able to understand, to identify the something referred to, or the speaker's attitude expressed. Remarkable is also the use of "wrong" words resulting in perfect understanding on the part of the hearer.

So the meaning of a word is not a greatest common divisor, nor is it a least common multiple. The meaning of a significant has a more or less definite number

of aspects (referential or, and attitudinal). Except for special cases in each separate speech situation only some of its elements or aspects are functioning as a clue for the hearer. In some situations or combinations even none of them. An example is obligatory rection of a definite grammatical category by a proposition, a noun, or a verb, or any other word, e.g. the ablative case in ab urbe, de urbe, ex urbe, or gender, number and case of bonarum in bonarum feminarum, or the ablative in uti gladio in Latin. Here the grammatical categories, which certainly have meanings of their own, are functioning as mere indicators of syntactic rank, as marks of determiners.

So it would be an illusioning to assume that the study of meaning is just a matter of summing up a large number of situations. On the other hand it would be unscientific to avoid the study of meanings either because of its complexity and difficulty, or because meanings are not perceivable, but thinkable.

6. Consequently, the study of the meaning of a significant : a word, a morpheme, a combination of words, a sentence intonation, or part of a sentence intonation, is much more delicate than making a comprehensive inventory of situations. Among other problems we have carefully to distinguish independent and combinatory meanings of the same word or other significant; correct and incorrect use which are not identical with effective and not effective use in a given situation; reference to the significant itself, and to something else present in the situation (suppositio materialis, and non materialis); cases where the meaning of the significant actually covers the something referred to, or the speaker's attitude expressed, and where it does not (individual and bold so-called metaphores), and where there even is contradiction between meaning and actually meant (e.g. in case of lying, or irony); cases of ambiguity, and others where there is no ambiguity.

For each of these distinctions the method of distinguishing and the criteria to be applied may be determined and formulated. There may be other such distinctions to be made prior to the actual analysis of a meaning, in order to eliminate cases where nothing or little can be inferred from the situation as to the meaning itself. This priority, of course, is more theoretical than practical. In practice, the question whether the meaning discussed is independent or combinatory; whether in a given situation the use of the word or other significant is correct, or not; whether the significant refers to itself, or not; whether there is metaphore, irony, or ambiguity, usually cannot be answered till one has pretty well established its meaning, or, at least, has conceived a very probable working hypothesis about it.

However, the only way to study a meaning is to start from situations in which the significant seems to be used correctly and effectively. In case of a language which is one's own mother-tongue, or of which one has a very good speaking and hearing knowledge, the linguist may apply the method of introspection, or, better, use himself as a test person. This procedure is valuable especially when dealing with one's own mother tongue. The results, however, should be checked by using other test persons having the same language for their mother tongue. In case of a foreign language other informants are indispensable.

7. A meaning of a significant is just what it has in common with the meaning of one or more other significant of the same language, plus in what it differs from them. So the definition of a meaning of a word necessarily is done by means of words or word groups having the same or opposite meanings. The only alternative is an extensive definition, i.e. an illustrative collection of sentences (or parts of sentences) with indication of the situations in which they may be used correctly and effectively.

The opposition of a meaning to another may be simple, i.e. that they have just one element different, e.g. boy and girl, or night and day. It may be complex, e.g. clock and thermometer. Two meanings may have no common feature, e.g. Charles and between. The features of a meaning always, or often, are more or less central or peripheric in relation to each other. In girl the feature of human being is more central than that of young and of female. Analogously the marks of a significant are arranged in a similar hierarchic way. The phonemes of a word and their order are more central than the number of syllables, which, in its turn, is more central than absence or presence, or the place of word accent. Analogously, the distinctive features of a mark of a significant always, or very often, are arranged hierarchically. Evidently the pitch formants of a vowel in Latin are more central than length. Features of meanings, of forms of significant, and of marks of significant, in combinations are of different rank. The structure of a system in language is a collection of relations between the members of the system. These relations are not only oppositions, but also a matter of rank. The opposition between the meaning of the words boy and girl is the same as that between the word groups young human male and young human female, i.e. the identical and the different features are the same. The rank, however, within the same meanings, is different.

Methods and criteria to establish ranks of features of meanings should be found and applied. In case of the word groups mentioned word order is a mark of rank. There is no such mark or criterion in case of the words boy and girl. In this case other criteria should be found, or it should be proved that in this and similar cases there is no linguistic, and, if any, only a logical rank. The usual criterion, especially in case of nucleus and determiner in a subordinate word group, is based upon the definition that if a combination a plus b is such that a without b can be used in a similar function, e.g. syntactically, but not b without a, a is called more central than b. For instance There were small is not usual or correct, There were birds is. So in the group small birds the word birds is more central than small. In applying this criterion, however, disturbing factors of various kinds have to be taken into account. For instance in many birds the word birds is more central than many, though There were many is correct.

The same problems exist as to the rank of features of forms, and of marks of significant.

8. As a meaning is something opposed to meanings of other significant in the same language, and a significant in an actual situation functions as a clue (term of Alan H. Gardiner) owing to the fact that there are such oppositions, the method of studying meanings is analogous to the study of forms of significant, and of features of marks. It is the procedure of comparing in order to establish common elements and different elements. Thus by comparing the forms man and can, or (the) import and (to) import marks of forms of significant are established: phonemes and accents. Thus by comparing p, b, t, d, k, g distinguishing features of phonemes are established. Thus by comparing boy and girl as to their meanings, common and different features are established.

There seem to be two different kind of things that should be compared at the same time. First, in case of referential meanings, the things referred to themselves (either objects, or persons, or qualities of objects, etc., or processes, or relations, etc.), and, in case of attitudinal meanings, such as meanings of sentence-words: interjections, and yes, no, etc., the states of mind or speaker's attitudes in the actual situations. Second, the contextual use of the significant themselves, in case of words the valence of the words, i.e. their ability

of being used as a nucleus of definite type of groups, or as determiner in a definite type of group, and as determiner of a certain rank. For instance substantives may be used as a nucleus in a group substantive plus adjective. An adjective may be used as a determiner of a substantive (good wine), or of a verb (the wine is good), but of lower rank than a deictic word, as is shown by word order: this good wine, not: good the wine. Similarly of a lower rank than a numeral: these two good boys, not these good two boys, or rarely, and in that case owing to a disturbing factor. In case of bound morphemes, such as cases or tenses, the valence of the words in which they occur may be established, i.e. identities and differences. So in Latin a substantive in a genitive case, i.e. with the morpheme of the genitive, usually is determiner of another substantive (pars pecuniae, part of the money), in an ablative case usually of a verb (pecunia adiuvare, to help with money).

A very interesting example of applying the first method is offered by William E. Bull's paper AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE NATURE OF ACTIONS AND THE FUNCTIONS OF VERBS IN SPANISH, and his QUEDAR and QUEDARSE: A STUDY OF CONTRASTIVE RANGES (Hispania 32, 64-73, 1949, and Language 26, 467-480, 1950).

An interesting synthesis of the problem of meaning in language and its use in speech is the paper REFERENTIAL ADJUSTMENTS by Garvin, in

9. In applying the method of comparison in order to establish identities and differences use should be made of various working hypotheses which have already proved to be of considerable help, and which, in fact, have not been proved wrong on the evidence of actual facts of speech or language.

The first is that, except for special cases, i.e. cases with disturbing factors, a significant has always the same meaning. The seeming contradiction that it may be used to refer to, or to express, different things or states of mind, is accounted for by the fact that in speech usually only part of the features of a meaning constitute the actual clue to what is meant. This is a hypothesis of Roman Jakobson's.

The second, of Trubetzkoy and Jakobson's, is that the oppositions of morphological or grammatical systems, such as cases and tenses, are always simple, even bitermal, i.e. of the type a/a plus b, or: a without b/a with b, or: a plus b/a plus c (cumulative, privative, and contrarious oppositions).

A third seems to be that there is always different rank of features of meaning within the same meaning, as has been illustrated before.

As to morphological systems, it has not been settled as yet whether, e.g. in case systems, oppositions of meaning, or oppositions of syntactical valence of the words in which the morphemes occur, are primary, the others secondary. Compare L. Hjelmslev, La categoric des cas, 1935-37; Roman Jakobson, Beitrag zur allgemeinen Kasuslehre, Travaux du Cercle Linguistique de Prague 6, 240-88 (1936); A. W. de Groot, Les oppositions dans les systèmes de la syntaxe et des cas, Melanges Bally, 107-27 (1939); and, recently, J. Kurylowicz, Le problème du classement des cas, Bull. de la Soc. Polonoise de Linguistique 9, 20-43 (1949).

10. The most important distinction of types of meanings, or of features of meanings, seems to be the distinction of referential meanings, used by the speaker to refer to something in the outer world, i.e. in supposed, or fictional, thought of reality, and attitudinal meanings, used by the speaker to express his state of mind or attitude to things referred to (by means of words of the same

sentence), or implied by the word itself, e.g. an interjection : Ouch ! or : Yes. No. Attitudinal are also statements and questions, e.g. the attitudinal actor-action construction he comes, as opposed to the merely referential actor-action construction (I want) him to come, or birds sing as opposed to singing birds. Compare my paper STRUCTURAL LINGUISTICS AND SYNTACTIC LAWS, Word 5,1-12, esp.4-5, where I called them objective and subjective meanings. See also my book STRUCTURELE SYNTAXIS, 1949, Register sub "Betekenis".

In matter of language, as opposed to speech, the first aim should be to establish the structure of the system of all words of the given language, i.e. the structure of the system of word classes, with its subdivisions. Compare my paper STRUCTURAL LINGUISTICS AND WORD CLASSES, in Lingua 1,427-500 (1948), esp.468-472, and 484-487. By "all words" is to be understood also compounds and inflected words, not only the so-called vocabulary as it figures in dictionaries.

A.W. DE GROOT

A comprehensive inventory of significant in language seems to be :

1. words;
2. elements of words, which may be called morphemes, e.g. stem, aspect, tense, mood and person, also number of person, in Latin amavissem;
3. combinations of words, e.g. a black swan, or a white crow;
4. sentence intonations : Yes. Yes ? Yes !
5. parts of sentence intonations, e.g. Yes, but will he come ?  
(Statement plus question.).

On the problem of ranks of destructive features of marks, e.g. of phonemes, see my paper Neutralization d'oppositions, in Neophilologus (about 1935). This paper, of course, by now is out-dated in many respects. The problem is discussed also by Y. Michel, La Phonologie.