Discussing Word Meaning: The Question of Internalism vs. Externalism

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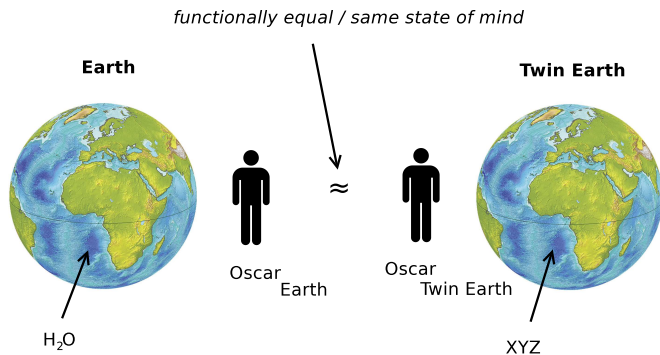
Metalinguistic Disagreement and Semantic Externalism, May 2022

1. Twin Earth & varieties of semantic externalism

2. Arguments for non-truth-conditional word meaning

3. When lexical meaning becomes relevant for utterance meaning

Twin Earth: The Incomplete Folk Version

functionally equal / same state of mind

Earth

Twin Earth

Oscar$_{Earth}$

Oscar$_{Twin Earth}$

$\approx$

H_2O

XYZ

- The thought experiment presumes that Oscar$_E$ and Oscar$_T$'s mental presentations of 'water' (in their idiolects) are individuated externally.
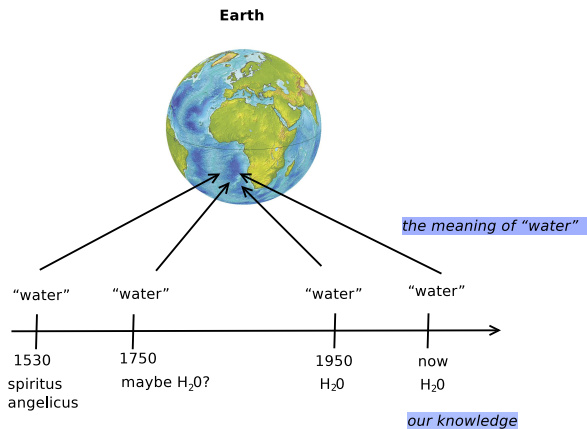
- Externalism gets lexical meaning right in cases of theory change. "Water" always meant the same *from a truth-conditional perspective*.

Semantic Externalism(s)

The meanings of (some / most / all) linguistic expressions are individuated externally.

- Which expressions? For the purpose of this talk, general terms and verbs.
- The most reasonable position is in my opinion that the meanings of *some* expressions are individuated externally (e.g. natural kind terms).
- Internalism could be taken as the claim that the meanings of some/most/all linguistic expressions are individuated internally to a speaker's cognition.
- However, a more realistic internalism understands meaning as an abstraction from the cognition of one or more speakers. In that case, externalism may need to be characterized as not (only) being based on cognition and involving an indexical component.
- N.B.: It is possible to be a semantic internalist about some expressions and a semantic externalist about other expressions.

Central Claims

I will defend the following theses:

(DT) Decomposition Thesis

The meaning of linguistic expressions can be decomposed into other meanings or meaning-like entities like concepts, semantic markers, and Fregean senses.

(ST) Separation Thesis

Lexical meaning need not enter the truth-conditional content of an utterance.

DT is not compatible with what I call 'indexical externalism', but remains compatible with social externalism. ST is needed if the lexical semantics is to be combined with a truth-conditional sentence-level semantics.

Metalinguistic disputes often concern the right or the most adequate meaning of a term relative to some theory or set of opinions. This type of lexical meaning is idiolectal and definitional and at odds with semantic externalism.

(1)   a.   Secretariat is an athlete.

          b.   No, Secretariat is not an athlete (Ludlow 2008: 118)

(2)   a.   *Athlete* means *human or animal that elicits a high level of physical prowess and training, usually in races and other competitions.*

          b.   No, that's wrong. Animals cannot be athletes.

(3)   a.   An athlete is a human or an animal that elicits a high level of physical prowess and training, often in races and other competitions.

          b.   No, that's wrong. Animals cannot be athletes.

- Although they are not equivalent in terms of truth-conditions, (2) and (3) can be used more or less interchangeably.

Internalism and Metalinguistic Disputes
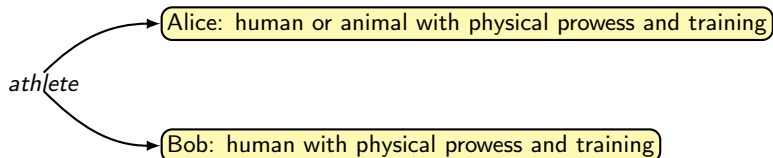
- Different speakers may have different idiolectal meanings of *athlete* 'in mind'. This can explain why (1) is a metalinguistic dispute.
- In general, this type of theory leads to the problems of explaining how (i) Alice and Bob can understand each other, (ii) why they are not talking at cross purposes, and (iii) in which sense they actually disagree.
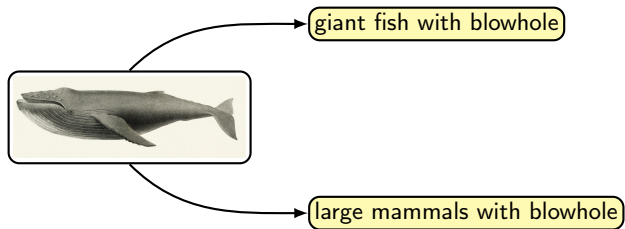
Definitional Lexical Meaning

- Speakers do not necessarily talk at cross purposes when...
  - ...they share a minimal core meaning with respect to a term (Rast 2017), e.g. prototypical athletes are human, and
  - can keep track of their theories and conceptions to some extent (Rast 2022), and
  - topic equality is warranted by measurement operations or is presumed as nominal topic equality (Rast 2020).
- Speakers often discuss what counts as the right or an adequate definition of a term in explicit metalinguistic disputes.

Indexical externalism seems to imply semantic atomism, but this position fares badly with productive word composition processes and componential analysis in general. Semantic atomism for all terms is implausible, but if it is assumed for *some* terms only, then it leads to undesirable ontological consequences.

Componential analysis is used for all kinds of theoretical purposes. The classical analysis of kinship terms is based on componential analysis. See Wallace (1960), cf. more detailed recent work like Pericliev (2013) for Bulgarian kinship terms.

- *MoFa* = the father of the mother
- *grandfather* decomposes into *FaFa or MoFa*
- *grandmother* decomposes into *FaMo or MoMo*

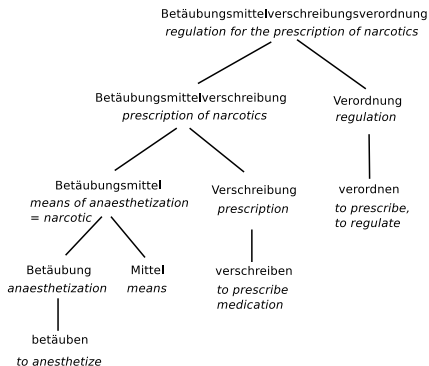**These are similar to classical logical textbook definitions, but the theorizing strives for cognitive adequacy.**

Comparison of English *river*, *stream* versus French *rivière*, *fleuve* in Culler (1976):

	Shores are distant	Empties into sea
river	−	
stream	+	
rivière		−
fleuve		+

Componential analysis is needed to make cross-linguistic comparisons like this.

Word Composition

(4)   a.   Ger. *Betäubungsmittelverschreibungsverordnung*
      b.   Eng. *regulation for the prescription of narcotics*

Betäubungsmittelverschreibungsverordnung
regulation for the prescription of narcotics

Betäubungsmittelverschreibung
prescription of narcotics

Verordnung
regulation

Betäubungsmittel
*means of anaesthetization
= narcotic*

Verschreibung
prescription

verordnen
*to prescribe,
to regulate*

Betäubung
anaesthetization

Mittel
means

verschreiben
*to prescribe
medication*

betäuben
to anesthetize

Atomistic Lexical Externalism. Every word has an externalist meaning, including seemingly composed words.

Hybrid Lexical Externalism 1. Morphologically primitive words have an atomistic externalist word meaning out of which the meanings of morphologically derived words are composed.

Hybrid Lexical Externalism 2. There is a designated ontology of primitives with an externalist semantics. Word meaning of semantically complex words is decomposed into those, independently of their morphological realization in a particular language.

Externalist Positions

Atomistic Lexical Externalism. Every word has an externalist meaning, including seemingly composed words.
not language-relative, no semantic word composition

Hybrid Lexical Externalism 1. Morphologically primitive words have an atomistic externalist word meaning out of which the meanings of morphologically derived words are composed.
language-relative, incoherent externalisms since languages have different morphologically primitive inventories

Hybrid Lexical Externalism 2. There is a designated ontology of primitives with an externalist semantics. Word meaning of semantically complex words is decomposed into those, independently of their morphological realization in a particular language.
not language-relative, violates ontological relativity (Quine 1969)

In all of these positions, metalinguistic disputes about primitive terms must be explained as world-level disputes in disguise.

Internalists do not need to presume a designated ontology for 'semantically primitive terms' because they do not claim that the underlying ontology matches reality (is factual and adequate). We could be wrong about any of those facts, i.e., the ontology might need to be revised for all kinds of reasons.

The Karhu Example

[example from S. Hirvonen, image by Tero Porthan]

karhu

The Finnish word *karhu* for bear was taboo because bears were holy animals of the forest associated with the goddess Mielikki and cosmological myths of origin. Bears were worshiped and you were not supposed to talk about them.

- Finnish speakers referred to bears when they were talking about karhus.
- The word *karhu* meant something like *god-like creature with magical abilities about which we ought not speak, ...*
- According to my position, it is false to claim that *karhu* meant the same in Finland as *bear* means to us now.
- But there is a shared core meaning: looking like a bear.

(5) a. Whales are large fish of the sea with a blowhole.
     b. Whales are large mammals with a blowhole who live in the sea.

- These are two mutually incompatible theories about whales.
- When a speaker learns whales are mammals, then the meaning of *whale* changes.
- However, just like with *water*, the truth-conditional contribution of *whale* to a whole utterance is not this lexical meaning.

(6) a. This whale is huge.
     b. In context c and CEs i, the whale demonstratively referred to by the speaker of c is huge.
     c. In context c and CEs i, the large fish of the sea with a blowhole demonstratively referred to by the speaker in c is huge.

(ST) Separation Thesis

Lexical meaning need not enter the truth-conditional content of an utterance.

- The ancient fisher theory is false. Whales are not fish.
- Depending on theoretical goals, lexical meaning can represent many different things not directly related to the truth-conditional contribution of the expression. For example:
  - Commonly held common-sense beliefs at a time.
  - Expert definitions and simplified expert definitions ('dictionary meaning').
  - A speaker's idiolect at a time, including cases of lack of semantic competence, e.g. falsely taking *inflammable* to mean *not flammable*.
  - Prototypical meaning and core meaning such as looking like a whale, looking like a bear, etc.

(Roughly speaking) A term is at issue when it is mentioned and the subject of predication or when it is used in an utterance that ascribes general properties of a definitory quality to the entities falling under it:

(5)   Whales are large fish of the sea with a blowhole. ⇝*whale* at issue

(6)   This whale is huge. ⇝*whale* not at issue

Compare this to appositive construction in Potts (2004):

(7)   Lance Armstrong, 2003's Tour winner, had never won it before 2003.
        (Potts 2004: 49)

Summary

- Lexical meaning often tracks common beliefs and sometimes expert beliefs *at a given time in a given speaker community*, but not necessarily according to our current best theory.
- Lexical meaning need not be truth-conditionally relevant to an utterance as a whole.
- The adequacy and merits of theories supporting lexical meaning decompositions need not be a primary concern in a theory of lexical meaning, e.g. in diachronic lexical semantics.
- Lexical meaning may become at issue in certain kinds of metalinguistic disputes.
- The Separation Thesis is only a problem for theories that stipulate that sentence-level truth-conditional meaning is the *one and only* sort of meaning.

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