Philosophy of Language // Spring 2020

Handout 5

Sense and tone: Dummett

Compositionality. Dummett begins by noting the links between Frege's work in the foundations of mathematics and his concern with the theory of meaning. Formal axiomatization, such as formulation of geometry as an axiomatic system where theorems follow from axioms by the rules of inference, requires understanding of proof-theoretic mechanism. A proof cannot be made of a mere sequence of sentences. Which sentence logically follows from which is determined by the meaning of those sentences. So we say: 1 2

> *Principle of Compositionality* The meaning of an individual sentence is determined by the meaning of its constituent parts.

From the beginning, the analysis of meaning could not be conducted syntactically, by simply specifying syntactic rules (compare the Lenin-kissing sentence (2-3) earlier on). It should be semantic, showing the dependence of the meaning of a sentence on the meanings of its constituent parts.

Tone. Dummett's chief concern in this chapter is to present and contrast the Principle of Compositionality and the Context Principle. He makes a short detour to distinguish between sense and tone.

The idea is to say that speakers may recognise differences in the use of two words and loosely associate it with their respective meanings. Frege's own example is poetic language. Thus when Shakespeare says: 61 top

(5-1) Weary with toil, I haste me to my bed

and I paraphrase:

(5-2) Having been tired with work, I rush to get in bed,

you think that something (everything!) is lost from the singular beauty of the original sentence. This is certainly so. But the difference is not semantic. Shakespeare and myself are saying the same thing (about our respective selves), just in a different style. Part of it is due to the different tone of the words 'weary' and 'tired', 'toil' and 'work', or 'haste' and 'rush'. Replacing one with the other will not alter the truth value of a sentence, even where the original sentence 'sounds' different from the resulting sentence.

Pejoratives. Dummett's own example of the contrast between sense and tone is the contrast between 'dog' and 'cur'. 2 bot
Logic 140 The example derives from Frege's own. This is a quaint example in English: some current native speakers don't even know what 'cur' means! In any case, 'cur' usually means 'mongrel' (a dog of a mixed breed). Thus sentences can change their truth value upon relevant substitutions, as in 'The most expensive dog in the world is a dog' and 'The most expensive dog in the world is a cur.' Dummett obviously intends a different, pejorative meaning of 'cur' (which was the point of Frege' original example). It is, then, a further very interesting question whether pejoratives have a semantic meaning (sense) different from their neutral counterparts (see also our earlier example of Bosch/German). Thus compare:

(5-3) Proust is a homosexual

and:

(5-4) Proust is a faggot.

As Frege sees it, the two sentences necessarily have the same truth value, and therefore the same sense—although they can convey different attitudes as a matter of their linguistic meaning.

Context Principle. A claim missing from *On Sense and Reference*, but prominent in Frege's early writings, is that 3
words have meaning only in the context of a sentence. As Dummett notes, this goes against the ancient tradition of ascribing meaning to words first. In the empiricist tradition of Hobbes and Locke, words stood for 'ideas'. The terminology of 'ideas' has always been misleading, and it certainly had psychologistic connotations. Words compose sentences, and the meaning of the sentence is determined by the meanings of individual words. The Principle of Compositionality is a very intuitive way of thinking about meaning.

Now, as Dummett interprets it, you can see the Principle of Compositionality as a way of learning and understanding 4 mid
the meaning of sentential wholes. You grasp the meaning of a sentence by processing the meaning of individual words. However, this obscures the central role of sentences. In the first place, we use language to convey thoughts. If I shout, 'Dog!', I have not done much of use with my linguistic capacity. Hearing me utter this word, you would have to figure out what it is that I said—i.e. figure out what *sentence* I uttered (perhaps a combination of a declarative and an imperative: 'There is a dog there—watch out!'). Secondly, when I want to tell you what a word means, I will have to cite its use within certain sentences. This means that you can understand the meaning of that word only through your grasp of the meaning of those sentences.

Question 1. Meaning of words, names in particular, is often explained by pointing. Would this be an objection to the idea that sentences have explanatory priority?

This seems to entangle us in a circle. We grasp ('recognise') the meaning of a sentence by grasping the meaning of its words, but each word is intelligible only through its use in sentences. Dummett's way out of the circle is to connect the 5
sentential meaning normatively to its truth conditions. We should justify the meaning of individual sentences by citing the conditions under which they are true.

YSB