

## Word Meaning Special Issue, *Dialectica*

### ‘Word Meaning – What it is and What it is not’

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In 2014, the workshop ‘The Nature of Word-Meaning’ brought linguists, logicians, philosophers and psychologists together to discuss – the title gives it away – the nature of word meaning.<sup>1</sup> The topic is of importance and interest to all these disciplines because the solution to a range of problems depends on getting clear about questions about meaning in particular and representation in general. The central question of the workshop was how one should conceive of word meaning, if there is such a thing. Take a word like ‘cut’, or ‘green’, or ‘dog’. Does it express the same meaning in different utterances? If so, how does knowledge of this meaning guide and determine correct use? What kind of thing is such a context-invariant meaning? If the same word expresses different meanings (in different contexts), does that mean the word is ambiguous or merely underspecified? What kind of thing are such occasion-specific meanings?

These and other questions are addressed in this special issue which presents four papers that grew out of the workshop. Here is a brief overview of the papers.

Most words that we use are polysemous, but what exactly is polysemy and how is it represented in the mind? Some theories try to reduce polysemy to monosemy, where the proposed single meaning is taken to be abstract or schematic (semantically underspecified) and has to be pragmatically fleshed out on any occasion of use. A different proposal is that polysemy is ambiguity (that is, words encode multiple senses) and the role of pragmatics is simply to select among those senses on any occasion of use. This is the issue addressed by François Recanati in his paper ‘Contextualism and Polysemy’ and his position on it can be summarized by his slogan ‘Polysemy is conventionalized modulation.’ The appeal to both modulation and conventionalization allows him to steer a middle course between monosemy and ambiguity. Because polysemy is conventionalised *modulation*, a polysemous word is not ambiguous. Speakers perceive some meanings of a polysemous word as modulations of a more central meaning. Because polysemy is *conventionalised*

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modulation, a polysemous word encodes not only *one* unspecific, but *several* specific (related) meanings.

The notion of modulation of meaning that figures in Recanati's paper is also central in the contribution from Nicholas Allott and Mark Textor, 'Lexical Modulation without Concepts'. It is standardly assumed that in lexical modulation either a concept that determines an extension or a mere 'grab bag' of information serves as the starting point of a process of narrowing/broadening whose endpoint is an occasion specific meaning. But if the occasion specific meaning is just a sub- or super- concept of the concept that was our starting point, the new concept might need further modulation to fit the situation. The process of modulation potentially never comes to an end. Allott and Textor build on work on semantic externalism to develop an account of lexical modulation that escapes this and other problems. Their idea is that in lexical modulation we aim to conform to our linguistic ancestors as well as our contemporaries and in order to do so we may need to revise things that we unthinkingly took for granted when we were inducted into the use of a word. Concepts play no explanatory role in lexical modulation. Instead, the notion that does the work is conformity with prior use.

In their contribution, 'What do Words do for us?', Ronnie Cann and Ruth Kempson approach the issue of word meaning from the perspective of their Dynamic Syntax framework. They focus on the common conversational phenomenon of split utterances (one person starts a sentence and another finishes it), and ask what the meaning of a word must be so as to allow such interactions. Their answer is that a word encodes a 'procedure', that is, an instruction to build a partial mental representation which then serves as the starting point for further construction such that different speakers can jointly build up a structured representation of utterance content. They explore the variety of structure-building actions that different word types - verbs, nouns, pronouns, quantifiers, adjectives, connectives, and others - contribute to the dynamic incremental processes of utterance parsing and production. On their account, the conceptual content associated with a word on an occasion of use is always *ad hoc* and need not be identical across the interlocutors. It is the result of the word's procedural component interacting with a wealth of general and specific knowledge, including each individual's stored traces of past uses of the word, all constrained by standard pragmatic principles of conversational relevance.

Charles Travis' rich paper 'Views of my Fellow's Thinking' explores what we can learn from the 'authoring tools model' about the meaning of words. According to this model, words of a language are tools that have a dedicated function, namely to make recognizable how speakers of this language represent the world. An assertoric sentence is a dedicated tool for making recognizable how a speaker represents the world as being. Travis connects the authoring tools model with Frege's notion of a thought. An assertoric sentence is a dedicated tool for making recognizable the thought that a speaker puts forth as true on an occasion. Now, he claims, the same assertoric sentence can on the same occasion be correctly used to make recognizable that the speaker puts forth the thought that p as well as the different thought that q. Hence, we cannot provide a finite 'recipe' that determines which thought a speaker puts forth as true when uttering one and the same sentence on an occasion. If such a recipe is a meaning, Travis is sceptical that there are any meanings. He takes the phenomenon of utterances of sentences making recognizable how the speaker represents the world to be theory resistant. Now many philosophers and linguists take their goal precisely to provide such a theory. If Travis is right, they need to change their theoretical ambition or reject the view that language is a dedicated tool for making recognizable how the speaker represents the world.

The question about the nature of word meaning is fundamental and of importance to several disciplines. How best to answer it is currently a matter of lively debate. We hope that the contributions in this volume show the reader what is at stake in this debate and present interesting possible approaches to it.

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