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Types of Meaning: Two is Better Than Too Many

How many types of expression meaning are there? According to one familiar proposal, humans regularly acquire grammars that generate (i) *denoters* of a basic type <e>, (ii) truth-evaluable *sentences* of a basic type <t>, and (iii) expressions of nonbasic types that are characterized recursively: if <α> and <β> are types, so is <α, β>; where expressions of type <α, β> signify *functions*, from things of the sort signified with expressions of type <α> to things of the sort signified with expressions of type <β>. On this view, human languages are importantly like the language that Frege invented to study the foundations of arithmetic. In the talk, I'll argue that this conception of human linguistic expressions overgenerates wildly, even distinguishing—as we should—competence from performance. (Davidson's earlier approach, according to which human linguistic expressions exhibit *no* semantic typology, also ovegenerates in its own way.) I'll sketch an alternative that I have developed elsewhere, as an illustration of a broader point: if we're trying to provide theories of *human* languages, and the kinds of meanings that our natural expressions can connect with pronunciations, then we shouldn't be surprised if (i) theoretical vocabulary designed to describe a very different space of languages is inadequate, and (ii) it's more productive to emphasize concerns about overgeneration and develop theoretical vocabulary that is more tailored to the natural phenomena in question, even if that means positing just a few types of human linguistic meanings.

Meanings, Homophony, and Polysemy

It's often said that words have meanings that determine extensions of some kind, at least relative to contexts. But the phenomenon of polysemy, illustrated with words like 'window' and 'book', suggests that a single meaning can correspond to a family of concepts that are not extensionally equivalent. I'll argue that polysemy, which differs importantly from lexical homophony, is an instance of the broader phenomenon that words are—by their nature—conceptually equivocal: even if a word is introduced as a device for expressing a single concept that has an extension, once it is introduced, the word can be used to express other concepts that are not extensionally equivalent. This is true even for words like 'water'; following Chomsky, I think Putnam was wrong about the meaning of 'water' (and the meaning of 'meaning'). Indeed, I'll end by arguing that Putnam's famous examples support a kind of internalism about linguistic meaning, even given an externalist accounts of conceptual contents.

Meanings, Concepts, and Composition

Humans regularly acquire languages that connect meanings with pronunciations, spoken or signed, in distinctive ways. Especially after Chomsky (1957, 1959, 1964, 1965), one might have assumed that whatever human linguistic meanings are, they are—like pronunciations—aspects of expressions generated by procedures that impose *constituency structure* on strings of lexical items, each of which connects its meaning with a pronunciation; where this is compatible with lexical and phrasal homophony, as illustrated with 'artistic sheriff who drew his gun at the bank'. Indeed, one might have assumed that meanings are *intrinsic* aspects of the relevant generable expressions, and that describing a grammar in terms of its syntax is one important way of describing a biologically implementable procedure that lets speakers combine lexical items in a certain recursive way; see. e.g., Chomsky and Halle (1968, p. 3). From this perspective, it seems obvious that the meaning of a complex expression like 'gray horse that the sheriff bought' is

somehow constructed from the meanings of 'gray', 'horse', and 'that the sheriff bought'. But Davidson (1967) and Lewis (1968/1975, 1970), each in their own ways, posited semantic properties that don't *compose* in any interesting sense: the truth theoretic properties they ascribed to sentences are *recursively specifiable*, for each language, in terms of a lexicon and a syntax; but this very weak constraint invites questions about (i) which *stronger* constraints are satisfied by the actual semantic properties of human linguistic expressions, and (ii) whether phrasal expressions have meanings that are *structured* in ways that mirror phrasal structure, as Chomsky had suggested. I'll argue that the meaning of a complex expression is a biologically instantiated complex *instruction* for how to build a complex concept of a certain kind. In my view, the relevant modes of composition are severely constrained, but lexical meanings are flexible (or "polysemous") in ways that are often ignored by advocates of truth-theoretic semantics.