



Metasemantics and imaginability

Horst Ruthrof

Murdoch University, Perth, Western Australia, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 28 July 2012

Received in revised form 22 September 2012

Accepted 22 September 2012

Available online 5 November 2012

Keywords:

Imaginability

Aboutness

Linguistic linkage compulsion

Iconicity

Schematisation

Sufficient semiosis

ABSTRACT

In support of an analogical conception of natural language, linguistic meaning occurs, the paper claims, when we associate *Vorstellung*, understood as mental, iconic variation of perception, with linguistic expressions under the control of the 'linguistic linkage compulsion'. In this sense meaning is argued to be *indirectly public aboutness*. To cater for the mental, phylogenetic, and social aspects of language I emphasise three necessary theoretical perspectives: psychologism, ethology, and conventionalism. The second part of the paper applies the proposed metasemantic principles to sketching a resolution of Locke's paradox of private meanings in the face of public discourse, a repair of Husserl's ideality of meaning; the re-insertion of *Vorstellung* in Wittgenstein's meaning as 'use'; and a review of the Davidsonian conflation of imaginability and truth.

© 2012 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Word-language allows of nonsensical combinations of words, but the language of *Vorstellung* does not allow us to imagine anything nonsensical. (Wittgenstein, *PI* Section 512)

1. Introduction

Even if consciousness should turn out to be an illusion (Kandel et al., 2000; Wright, 2005; Churchland, 2008) it is at the very least an illusory fact which we put to effective, self-reflective practice. Certainly, a degree of 'introspective reliability' is hard to deny (Hohwy, 2011). As far as language is concerned, whichever way 'the human brain produces the mind' (Favareau, 2006, p. 2), we must come to grips with what we *imagine* when we listen to the speech of others. The roots of this unavoidable, though much neglected, process in the comprehension of natural language have to be sought in its origins as a secondary signifying system *gradually* superimposed on perceptual conception and gestural communication during hominid existence (Ruthrof, 2000, 2010; cf., in contrast, Bickerton, 1981, 1987, 1990, 1995). This folk psychological base line can be regarded as a 'kind of narrative practice' in Hutto's sense (2008, p. 4). Yet doing so only forces us to note that, like any narrative, folk psychology is a higher-level mental projection of possible scenarios grounded in realist resemblance relations and their imaginative, non-realist, variations. And it is resemblance relations at the heart of conceptuality that makes natural language irrevocably analogical (Love, 2007). This should not be too surprising. After all, as an economising sign system subsuming its perceptual and gestural precursors, language could not but have inherited at least traces of their *iconicity*, including a *perceptual* and *gestural protosyntax* (Ruthrof, 2011a, p. 118). As I have argued elsewhere, this emphasis opposes approaches to the description of natural language characterising it in terms of formal sign systems, as a kind of interpreted calculus, as primarily syntactic, as computational, and via other 'rear-view mirror' interpretations (Ruthrof, 1997, 2000, 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2012).

E-mail address: h.ruthrof@murdoch.edu.au

That language as a syntactically ordered string of signifiers is *public* is not in doubt; what is, is whether what is observable is all there is to meaningful speech. For without the contribution of the mind, that is, mental events, 'language as use' fails to account for the bulk of linguistic performance when we speak about absent things and self-reflectively about our won feelings, fears, and hopes. Yet this is not to concede that the mental events that make signifiers meaningful are *private*. Imaginability in language use is conceived here as social performance. As I will stress, the mental events that make language meaningful are *indirectly public* which, however, does not legitimate the eliminative move proposed by Putnam's famous quip that meanings 'just ain't in the head'; semantic instantiation involves a good deal more than observables (Putnam, 1979, p. 227; Ruthrof, 2012). Certainly, language it would seem must include *Vorstellung*, understood as *iconic mental variation of perception*. Simply put, in order to understand natural language we must be able to imagine what it is *about*. *Vorstellbarkeit* as Imaginability is thus taken as a semantic *sine qua non*. That neurons must have a 'hand' in this I take for granted (Jacob, 2008), but this is not the focus of this paper. My focus is on the metasemantic ground of language, that is, *imaginability*, however neurally produced.

If semantics addresses the question of the association of syntactic strings of signifiers (Fregean signs or expressions; Peirce's representamens) with signifieds (Fregean *Sinne* and *Bedeutungen*; Peirce's interpretants), that is, their meaning, metasemantics asks what must be the case for signifiers to transform into signifieds in the first place. In a Fregean theorisation of natural language, we could phrase this relation as the determination of the semantic value of a predicate and as a function from objects to truth-value. Or we could simply ask how natural language terms obtain their semantic values. Mindful of the abundance of theorisations of language from Locke (Locke, 1993 [1689]) to hyperintensional semantics (Duzi et al., 2010) in the philosophy of language and a similarly rich palette of approaches in linguistics, it may be a bit reckless to give into the transcendental urge to subject them to a unified reconstruction of their metasemantic deep conditions. On the assumption that such a metasemantic perspective could nevertheless be fruitful the paper asks 'What are the conditions of the possibility of linguistic meaning presupposed in semantic theories?' The paper poses this question from its central hypothesis that *imaginability* is the metasemantic ground of natural language and attempts to offer tentative answers for four well-rehearsed positions.

2. Imaginability and aboutness

In pursuing this problematic, I take one of my cues from Wittgenstein, even if not entirely in the spirit of the *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein, 1986, 2009), where he writes 'I have to imagine pain which I *do not feel* on the model of the pain which I *do feel*' (PI Section 302). Generalising, we could say 'I have to *imagine* whatever I *do not perceive* on the model of what I *do perceive*'. In spite of his rejection of *Vorstellung* as a component of linguistic meaning, Wittgenstein never disputes *Vorstellung* as a mental fact. Indeed, without his ubiquitous use of *imaginability* in the *Philosophical Investigations* the book would be about half its size (Ruthrof, 2011b). If *Vorstellung* looms as large in language as my folk psychological suspicions suggest, then the paranoia with which the bulk of our semantic theories have avoided it is startling (Lepore and Smith, 2006; Devitt and Hanley, 2006; Davis and Gillon, 2004; Lamarque, 1997). Is it not an empirical fact that *Vorstellung* continuously mimics, modifies and radically alters the resemblance relations embodied in perception? (Noordhof, 2008; cf. Phillips, 2011; Zamuner, 2011). It is this non-propositional bedrock of *imaginability* which I take as the metasemantic ground of natural language (cf. Ichikawa, 2009; Carruthers, 2006). On this assumption, I want to assert the following. When speakers hear the sounds of their language, they are able to *imagine* what is being talked about. Comprehension has occurred. We could also say that they have *mentally* transformed syntactic strings of *public* signifiers into *indirectly public* signifieds. Vice versa, the production of linguistic expressions can be understood as a transformation of *Vorstellung* into syntactic strings of signifiers. If we cannot *imagine* what is being talked about, comprehension has failed and expressions remain objects at the level of mere sound; the ascent from syntactic sequence to semantics has not taken place. If *imaginability* is indeed the non-propositional bedrock of language, then resemblance relations at various levels of *hypoiconic* abstraction (Peirce, 1984, 2.273), should play a crucial role in semantics (Ruthrof, 1997, 2000, 2011a, 2012). This emphasis requires that we grant mental events a constitutive role in semantics in the sense that *imaginability* is made the central focus of what makes language meaningful; it also requires the acceptance of a high degree of 'cognitive flexibility' of the human mind (Kissine, 2012). While the mind's material, neural grounding in the brain is not in dispute, what matters foremost for semantics is the way socially and culturally guided imaginability is involved in the performance of linguistic meaning (cf. Pietroski, 2010). While not denying external factors being involved in semantics, this perspective seriously qualifies *externalist* explanations. Accordingly, natural language is viewed as 'a socially monitored set of instructions for imagining, and acting in, a world' (Ruthrof, 2011c, p. 169).

The bulk of semantic theories avoids the foundational problematic. Rather, they are distinguished from one another at the next level of analysis, addressing the question of the relation between given syntactic strings and their standard semantic values. This relation has been viewed as one between words and world, from Frege (1970 [1892]) to Putnam (1979); between Platonic semantic idealities and phenomena (Husserl, 1973a [1901]); between signifiers and signifieds constituting the linguistic sign (De Saussure, 2005 [1916]); between public expressions and mental sentences (Harman, 1973, 1999; Field, 1978, 2001; Johnston, 2004); between public language, mental computational syntax, and world (Fodor, 1975, 1987, 1998, 2001, 2005, 2007, 2008); and amongst place holders within a hyperintensional procedure (Duzi et al., 2010; Tichy, 1994; Creswell, 1975). The division of labour, however, has not proven entirely beneficial. Too many nets have been cast too narrowly. How then do words relate to world?

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1103340>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1103340>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)