Meaning, Interpretation and Semantics

We assume that an expression of a human language is meaningful. But what is a meaning? And how does a speaker of that language know what the expression means? There is a great deal of controversy in the fields of linguistic semantics and philosophy of language about the answers to these questions. But there is some consensus about a few clues that seem to point to the heart of the problem. Rather than talking about them in the abstract, it is probably best to illustrate with actual examples, like the following:

(1) A: Carol owes Sam $50.
   B: That’s not true—she paid him last week.

(2) Kent has gone to see a surgeon.
(3) Kent has gone to see a doctor.
(4) Kent has not gone to see a doctor.

(5) Attorney to witness: Have you stopped embezzling from your employer?

Indicative sentences—those used to make statements, like (1A), and (2) – (4)—are typically either true or false. That is to say that the kind of situation they describe either does or does not obtain, so that a hearer may either agree or, as in (1B) disagree with the proffered claim. There are various meaning relationships that hold between statements, in virtue of facts about the kinds of situations they describe. For example, because in the actual world a surgeon is a kind of doctor, any situation in which someone has gone to see a surgeon is also a situation in which that person has gone to see a doctor. Hence, whenever (2) is true, (3) is true as well. We say that the truth of (2) entails the truth of (3), or for short, that (2) entails (3). On the basis of the same facts about the world, a speaker of English knows that if (2) is true, then (4) must be false, and vice versa. Hence, we say that (2) and (4) contradict each other.

Sometimes we can neither agree nor disagree with a statement because it presupposes something we take to be false. For example, the witness in (5) cannot answer either “yes” or “no” without effectively admitting that s/he has embezzled, something s/he presumably might not wish to do in a court of law.

How do we know these things about the meanings of (1) – (5)? Presumably, because we know the meanings of the words they are composed of, plus how the meanings of each whole statement is composed of the meanings of those words in virtue of the structure of the sentence involved. If we replace surgeon in (2) with sturgeon, then the entailments and contradictions we observed disappear. And if we use the same words but re-arrange
them—like switching the positions of Kent and a surgeon in (2)—again we find a difference in the relationship of its meaning to that of (3) and (4).

All of this is to say that whatever the meaning of a statement is, a speaker who knows that meaning knows what conditions the statement would be true, the truth conditions of the statement. And whatever the meaning of a word is, a speaker who knows that meaning knows how that word would contribute to the truth conditions of any statement in which it occurs. We still may not know what a meaning itself is, but now we know at least one property associated with a meaning—knowing the meaning of an expression entails knowing how it contributes to truth conditions. There’s one view about knowing what something is according to which it involves knowing enough properties of that thing to be able to uniquely identify it—to say that no other individual has all those properties. According to that view, if we knew enough properties that meanings have, we could say what a meaning is. And knowing the meanings of enough expressions should help us to understand meaning in general.

According to the theory of meaning we have just sketched, to know the truth conditions for a statement, we must know the meanings of the words that comprise it. And to know the meaning of a word, we must know how it contributes to the truth conditions of any given utterance in which it occurs. How do we know the latter? It seems plausible to say that if we know the meaning of a proper name like Carl, Sam or Kent, we know what individual it refers to. (We might not be directly acquainted with that individual, but there are many ways to know who someone is short of direct acquaintance.) What about a non-proper noun, like surgeon, doctor or employer? As a first pass, assume that these words refer not to particular individuals but to sets of individuals—those of whom it can be truthfully said that they have the property of being a surgeon or a doctor or an employer. But even with apparently obvious senses this simple idea can be tricky to realize. Consider (6):

(6) (Pointing to an object:) That is a piece of fruit.

The word that is called a deictic, which is to say that we recover its reference by attending to what the speaker is indicating. Here, the indication is given by pointing at an object. The copula is tells us that the two entities referred to by the subject and the following noun phrase a piece of fruit are one and the same. The noun fruit is a mass noun, like water or sand, which means that by itself it isn’t something we count. Just as we can only count water or sand by using what’s called a classifier—glass of water, or pail of sand, if we want to count fruit, we have to use a classifier like piece (of). Putting this all together, we’d expect that (6B) would taken to be true just in case the indicated object is a member of the set of things that are pieces of fruit. What then counts as a piece of fruit? Apples, bananas and guavas are easy. But what about a tomato? Ordinarily, if I ask for a piece of fruit and you hand me a tomato, I’d feel you hadn’t complied with my wishes. But botanists do classify tomatoes as fruit. Who’s right? Do botanists have any more rights in this matter than ordinary speakers?
And what about a noun like *whale*? For a long time, whales were considered fishes, then at one point it was discovered that they are mammals. Would you say that at that point the meaning of the word *whale* changed, even though it still referred to the same individuals?

Or consider:

(7) Two stone lions guard the entrance to Columbus Police headquarters.

I would say that (7) expresses a true proposition. But why? What’s a lion? Isn’t it a mammal? But then how is (7) true? Oh, you might say—we’ve just extended the term here to refer to anything that resembles a lion. But then how explain:

(8) (Pointing to a toy held by a little boy:) That’s not a real gun.

This would be true even though the toy very much resembles a gun. You get the point.

What are the criteria for truthfully applying a noun to a particular individual?

Now consider what it is to be blind. Typically, a native speaker might agree that if one is blind then they cannot see. But consider (9):

(9) Hazel is legally blind.

To many, this statement would be taken to imply that Hazel might not be completely without sight, but only blind according to certain legal standards. And according to those standards in many states of the U.S., it is possible to be legally blind even though one can still see. (I had a student who was legally blind, but could still read with special glasses.)

Even if we can determine reasonable meanings for the words in a statement and know how to combine them, there is another important factor in determining what a competent speaker of English would take a particular utterance to mean: the context in which it is uttered (or written). Some expressions are particularly context-dependent. We saw an instance of this in (6), the deictic pronoun *that*. Pronouns sometimes take their meanings from the physical context, as in deixis, and other times from the previous discourse context. Consider the pronouns in (10) and (11):

(10) Only Barbara voted for her.

(11) Only Barbara voted for herself.

When we consider (10) out of the blue, we would be hard-pressed to say who Barbara voted for. If we meant that she voted for Barbara, we would say (11) instead. And in fact, that’s the only thing that (11) can mean—a reflexive pronoun like *herself* almost always has to have an *antecedent*—another noun phrase that it corefers with—in the same clause. But non-reflexive *her* generally *cannot* corefer with a preceding noun phrase in the same clause. If the speaker of (10) were pointing at a female individual,
then we’d take that to be the person she voted for. But otherwise, we need prior context to understand what the speaker intends in using the pronoun.

Pronouns are instances of anaphoric expressions—usually abbreviated expressions that pick up their reference from some preceding expression in the same discourse. There are many kinds of anaphoric expressions, and solving the intended antecedent for one of these can be complex. (12) – (14) are interesting cases, with the anaphoric expressions underlined:

(12)  A: Ralph called Stewart to tell him about the buy-out.  
B: He’s upset about it, isn’t he?  
A: Stewart doesn’t get upset about anything.

(13)  Mary thinks she has the mumps, and Clara does too.

(14)  Call to a hotel reservation system:  
Customer: I’d like a room in Columbus on Wednesday night, April 10th. Is there a single, non-smoking room available, with a kitchenette?  
Operator: There’s a double at our Lane Avenue location, and several single rooms available downtown.  
Customer: How about April 11th?

(13) involves what we call Verb Phrase ellipsis, and (14) is an example where the content of the how about question is retrieved from the prior context. In examples such as (10), and (12) – (14), how do we know what the anaphoric expression is supposed to refer to? I think it’s clear that we have to figure out what the speaker means in part by considering the context in which it is uttered. For example, (12) might continue in either of the following two ways:

(12’) B: Yeah, you’re probably right.  
(12’’) B: That’s not what I meant—I intended to ask whether Ralph’s upset.

I think we would grant B the right to argue that her first statement meant what she intended it to mean.

The elided verb phrase does to in the second conjunct of (13) leaves less room for ambiguity with respect to the antecedent: it must be thinks she has the mumps, the verb phrase from the first conjunct. However, there is an ambiguity here: Who does Clara think has the mumps? There are two possible interpretations in this context. And in (14), the interpretation of the question is something like ‘Is there a single, non-smoking room with kitchenette available in Columbus on Thursday night, April 11th?’, retrieved on the basis of the customer’s entire first request, and not just the interrogative Is there a single, non-smoking room available, with kitchenette?’. This barely hints at how complex the effects of context on interpretation can be.
Similarly with ambiguity. We agree that (15) is ambiguous. But in the contexts in (15’) and (15’’) the speaker’s intentions seem clear, and this resolves the ambiguity:

(15)    I want to throw a ball
(15’)    A: What kind of party are you planning?
          B: I want to throw a ball.
(15’’)   [Pitcher with an injured throwing arm, gazing wistfully at the pitcher’s mound:] I want to throw a ball.

But we might misunderstand what the pitcher was talking about in (15’’): Even though he’s wistfully looking at the mound, he might be in the midst of talking with someone about how to raise money for his favorite charity. Suppose that his interlocutor had just asked, “What would you like to do to help us raise money?” Taking (15’’) to be his response to that question, we’d take him to mean the same as B in (15’). If we misunderstood, he might say “Sorry, I didn’t make myself clear,” and we’d be likely to accept what he claimed to have meant.

So it’s clear that what a speaker means is partly a function of her intentions, and that this bears on the resolution of anaphora and of ambiguity. This bears on deixis, too: Suppose that when I utter (6) you think I’m pointing at a tomato and take issue with the truth of what I say. I could correct you and claim that I meant to refer to a banana, so long as the banana was in the same general direction I was pointing. Similarly, when I utter (9), I could continue, “and she can’t see a thing,” canceling any implication that the blindness is less than absolute. Or I might say, “Kent has gone to see a sturgeon.” You’d probably let me correct myself, “Oops—I meant to say surgeon.” This is all to say that speakers’ perceived intentions bear in important ways on how we interpret what they say.

But there are clear limits to the way that speakers’ intentions can bear on the meaning of what they say: We draw the line at entailments and standard word meanings. Suppose that a competent speaker of English utters (2) intending that surgeon refers to the set of trial lawyers. No matter—generally she cannot make that statement and then consistently state (4). Even in a context in which it is perfectly clear what’s at issue, and pretty clear what B might intend, as in (16), it just doesn’t work:

(16)    A: What kind of attorney do you want to be?
          B: I want to be a surgeon, because I love the combativeness of the courtroom.

The same constraint bears on syntax, how we put the words together to make a statement. (17) cannot mean what most people mean when they say “I miss Mary”:

(17)    Mary misses me.

This constraint holds even though it’s perfectly reasonable from a logical point of view to have a verb meaning *miss* that switches the subject and object around. Compare the French verb *manguer*, which does just that, as in *Marie me manque* ‘I miss Mary’. Why this constraint? In these cases, what the speaker intends just isn’t English as we
collectively speak it. There are communal conventions that constrain what we can reasonably be taken to intend by uttering words and sentences of English.

However, to complicate these matters yet more, language does change. You can see this in progress with slang. Here are a few examples:

(18) That sucks!
(19) I’m bad.
(20) My bad.

Up till around 1970, (17) could only be true if that referred to some entity that literally created a vacuum to draw a substance into itself—a vacuum cleaner, for example. Since then, it has come to mean something very different. (18) used to be an admission—an ethical statement (till the 1980s?), but now can be taken as a boast about one’s ability. (19) would have been ungrammatical and uninterpretable until pretty recently, because bad is an adjective, but my takes a noun like mistake to make a noun phrase. For example, we say my sadness, not *my sad. (The * is used by linguists to indicate ungrammaticality). But now (20) can mean pretty much what my mistake means—used to make an admission, and perfectly grammatical in slangy usage. Much of what we standardly use in English today started out as slangy usage. (**MORE EXAMPLES.) If conventions constrain what we can reasonably intend to mean when we speak, how come they can change? Who decides? Some authority?

And what about jargon, the special terminology developed by people in specific fields? Most often, we use standard English words and expressions in non-standard ways. Scholars do this all this time—so, for example, as a linguist I have defined the term focus in a very special way, to describe the way that emphasis is used to differentiate between the meanings of the statements in (21) and (22):

(21) John only introduced Marcus to SUE.
(22) John only introduced MARCUS to Sue.

Even though these two statements contain exactly the same words in exactly the same syntactic structures, they have different truth conditions, so that one might be true and the other false in the same situation. (Make sure you understand that claim.) My definition of this technical notion of focus:

(23) The focus of an utterance is the prosodically prominent constituent $\beta$ such that lambda abstraction on $\beta$ yields a property congruent with that underlying the question under discussion.

In a technical paper written for linguists, I would state this definition explicitly, and any time I used the word focus that’s the sense I would be taken to intend. Of course, this isn’t what I’d expect a layperson to take me to mean when I say (24) in the course of a community meeting:
(24) The working group should make its focus the resolution of the dispute between the city and our neighborhood association.

But within the scope of my linguistics papers, I have the right to use the term in the special sense, as long as I’ve made myself clear.

Even in daily conversation we often temporarily give special interpretations to ordinary expressions of English. For example, I used to regularly take the #7 COTA bus on Neil Avenue. I knew that at 5:05pm there was a bus that, though it had just gone north on Neil as the #7, returned going south with the sign changed to say “GARAGE”, not taking passengers. One had to wait til 5:11 for the #7 going south. Once at 5:05pm I was waiting in the bus shelter with another rider, someone I hadn’t seen there before. We saw a bus turn the corner to come toward us going south, but still too far away to read its sign. The other rider got up to walk to the curb, and I said, “That’s not the real bus. We have to wait six more minutes.” I think it is perfectly clear what I meant. The rider said “Oh” and returned to the shelter bench. But under most people’s conception of the meaning of real, we would say that the bus in question was a real COTA bus. I would argue that the context enabled me to convey a special refinement of what it was to be real. We call such shifts in meaning nonce meanings.

The phenomena of slang, jargon, and nonce meanings bear on a very tricky question: I said above that our communal intentions bear on what we can be taken to mean. But how do we know what those communal intentions are? For example, in discussing (6), we compared the ordinary person’s sense of fruit with that of a botanist. Who’s right? Who knows the meaning of a word? Please try this exercise for class next Tuesday (not to hand in): Look up the meaning of the word fruit in whatever dictionary you usually use, and bring the definition(s) you find (and the name of the dictionary) to class for discussion. And ponder these questions: In order to know the meaning of a word in your native language is it required that you have some special authority? If that’s the case, how do ordinary people understand each other? Who wrote that dictionary, and how did it come to be vested with the authority we deem it to have? How did words come to have their meanings before there were linguistic and lexicographic ‘experts’ (for English, that would be roughly before the 17th century)? Does a native speaker have a kind of linguistic expertise?