

Meaning Holism as a Semantics Theory

Rajiba Lochan Behera

Research Scholar

Department of Philosophy

University of Hyderabad.

Andhra Pradesh(India).

Abstract

“Language is a social art”.¹ Language is for communicating about the world outside of language.² A philosophy of language is a concentrated study of language which is used to describe the world at large and to fill it with meaning. It attempts to trace the initial formation of words, phrases, and text along with their connections to people’s thoughts and feelings. A common goal of philosophy of language is an attempt to list and define the specific criterion that makes a language an established language as opposed to a group of loosely connected sounds and symbols. Some of these criteria can often be found within the study of semantics. Semantics is the study of the “toolkit” for meaning. It tries to understand what meaning is as an element of language. Which is basically implies the study of how meaning in language is produced or created. Semantics encompasses how words, phrases and sentences come together to make meaning in language. It is a sub discipline of linguistic which focuses on the study of meaning. It is closely linked with another sub discipline of linguistic that is pragmatics which is also highly speaking about the study of meaning. This is a practical subject which is interested in meaning in language in use. But semantics is broadly theoretical research perspective. For the purpose of the present discourse, we shall be focused on the development and nature of meaning within the framework of semantics holism. Hence, we shall discuss the definition and beginnings of linguistic semantics as well as semantic holism.

Keywords: Language, Meaning, Semantics, Linguistics, Communication, Holism etc.

Introduction:

The term ‘semantics’ was invented only in the 19th century, but the subject of meaning has interested philosophers for thousands of years. The invention of the term ‘semantics’ is usually ascribed to Michel Breal (whose “*Essai de Semantique*” appeared in 1897) as a name for Philo-logical inquiries into meaning; where it described the historical study of

¹ W. V. O. Quine, *Word and Object*, The M.I.T. Press. USA, 1960.

² Patrick Griffiths, *An Introduction to English Semantics and Pragmatics*, Edinburgh University Press, Great Britain, Edinburgh, 2006.

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the meaning change of words. The word ‘semantics’ in its short history, has covered an extraordinary variety of intellectual activities. This is the French word “*semantique*” which has been coined from the Greek by Michel Breal. Chwistek meant by it what Carnap called ‘logical syntax’; it is often used to refer to such inquiries into meaning as Peirce’s theory of signs, Frege’s distinction between sense and reference, and Wittgenstein’s picture theory; at a more popular level, any attempt to analyze the manner in which we can be confused and misled by language is ‘semantics’.³ The Greek philosophers were the first people known to have debated the nature of meaning. The connotation of a sentence or of a word or any other language is also defined as semantics. For example: many people argue over the semantics. Semantics generally deals with the relationships between signs and objects or codes or situations. It also deals with the relation between signs and concepts. An understanding of semantics is essential to the study of language acquisition (how language users acquire a sense of meaning, as speakers and listeners, writers and readers) and of language change (how meanings alter over time).⁴ The study of semantics includes the study of how meaning is constructed, understood, explained, disguised, represented, simplified, exchanged, contradicted and interpreted. The meaning of a sentence is not just an unordered heap of the meanings of its words. If that were true, then ‘Cowboys ride horses’ and ‘Horses ride cowboys’ would mean the same thing. So we need to think about arrangements of meanings. Semantics probably won’t help you find out the meaning of a word you don’t understand, though it does have a lot to say about the patterns of meaningfulness that you find in words. It certainly can’t help you understand the meaning of one of Shakespeare’s verses, since poetic meaning is so different from literal meaning. But as we learn more about semantics, we are finding out a lot about how the world’s languages match forms to meanings. And in doing that, we are learning a lot about ourselves and how we think, as well as acquiring knowledge that is useful in many different fields and applications.⁵ Semantics is the area of philosophy of language and philosophy of linguistics dealing with the meaning of words or the meaning attached to words or symbols. This view places semantics at the core of communication in language. Indeed, there is no

³ Passmore John, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy*, Penguin Books, Australia, 1957.

⁴ Michel Breal, *Semantics: Studies in the Science of Meaning*, (Trans.) by Mrs. Henry Cust, Dover Publications, New York, United States, 1964.

⁵ Andrew Moore's teaching resource site.

communication without the sharing of meaning. Though the pursuit for the understanding of meaning has always been of interest to scholars. This first attempt to study of meanings by Philosophers brought about the area of semantics called philosophical semantics which examines the relationship between linguistic expressions and the phenomena they refer to in the external world.⁶ Philosophical semantics focuses on examining the conditions under which such linguistic expressions and the phenomena they refer to are true or false. This can be traced to as far back as Plato's and Aristotle's works. However, contemporary philosophical semantics can be traced to the works of the following authors: Rudolf Carnap, Alfred Tarski, W. V. O. Quine, and Charles Peirce. According to Peirce, philosophical semantics developed as *Semiotics* in America while with the influence of Saussure in France, the term *Semiology* was used. However, the idea of truth-based semantics was Tarski's major contribution. Linguistic semantics emphasizes the properties of natural languages while pure or logical semantics is the study of the meaning of expressions using logical systems. Examining semantics in this dimension makes it more mathematically related than linguistic in nature. It is important to note that the discussion of semantics as a branch of linguistics began recently and this shall be our next focus.

Semantics: Historical and Some Contemporary Theories of Meaning:

Ideational Semantics

There are several theories of semantics such as ideational semantics, behaviourist semantics, referential semantics, Fregean Semantics verificationist semantics etc which are atomistic in character. The 17th-century British empiricist John Locke held that linguistic meaning is mental: words are used to encode and convey thoughts, or ideas. A successful communication requires that the hearer correctly decode the speaker's words into their associated ideas. Hence construed, the meaning of an expression is the idea associated with it in the mind of anyone who knows and understands that expression (by Locke). But the ideational account of meaning, as Locke's view is sometimes called, is open to several objections. Suppose, for example, that a person's idea of *grass* is

⁶ Michel Breal, *The Beginnings of Semantics: Essays, Lectures, and Reviews*, (ed.) George Wolf, Stanford University Press, 1991.

associated in his mind with the idea of warm weather. It would follow that part of the meaning of *grass*, for this person, is warm weather. If so, then the meaning of *grass* or any other word may be different for each person. And in that case, how does anyone fully understand anyone else?⁷

Behaviourist Semantics

In an effort to provide linguistic meaning public and the study of linguistic meaning more “scientific,” the American psychologist B. F. Skinner (1904–90) proposed that the correct semantics for a natural language is behaviouristic. The meaning of an expression, as uttered on a particular occasion, is either;

- (1) The behavioral stimulus that produces the utterance,
- (2) The behavioral response that the utterance produces, or
- (3) A combination of both.

Thus, the meaning of *fire!* as uttered on a particular occasion might include running or calling for help. But even on a single occasion it is possible that not everyone who hears *fire!* will respond by running or calling for help. Suppose, for example, that the hearers of the utterance include a fireman and a person who happens to know that the speaker is a pathological liar. The behaviorist account seems committed to the implausible view that the meaning of *fire!* for these people is different from the meaning of *fire!* for those who run or call for help.

The behaviorist account, like the ideational one, is also exposed to the objection based on compositionality. Suppose that a person’s body recoils when he hears *brown cow* but not when he hears either *brown* or *cow* alone. The meaning of *brown cow*, which includes recoiling, is therefore not determined by or predictable from the meanings of *brown* and *cow*.

⁷ Danny David Steinberg and Leon A. Jakobovits, *Semantics: An Interdisciplinary Reader in Philosophy, Linguistic and Psychology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, New York, 1971.

Referential Semantics

Reference is an apparent relation between a word and the world. Russell, following the 19th-century British philosopher John Stuart Mill, pursued the intuition that linguistic expressions are signs of something other than themselves. He suggested that the meaning of an expression is whatever that expression applies to, thus removing meaning from the minds of its users and placing it squarely in the world. According to a referential semantics, what one learns when one learns the meaning of *onion* is that it applies to *onions* and to nothing else? One advantage of a referential semantics is that it respects compositionality: the meaning of *red onion* is a function of the meanings of *red* and *onion*, because *red onion* will apply to anything that is both *red* and an *onion*. But what about expressions that apparently refers to nothing at all, such as *unicorn*? A referential semantics would appear to be committed to the view that expressions such as *unicorn*, *Santa Claus*, and *Sherlock Holmes* are meaningless. Another problem, first pointed out by Frege, is that two expressions may have the same referent without having the same meaning. *The Morning Star* and *The Evening Star*, for example, refer to the same object, the planet Venus, but they are not synonymous. As Frege noted, it is possible to believe that the morning star and the evening star are not identical without being irrational (indeed, the identity of the morning star and the evening star was a scientific discovery). Examples such as these have led some philosophers, including Mill himself and Saul Kripke, to conclude that proper names lack meaning. But the problem also affects common nouns, including definite descriptions. The descriptions *The First President of the United States* and *The Husband of Martha Washington* apply to the same individual but are not synonymous. It is possible to understand both without recognizing that they refer to the same person. It follows that meaning cannot be the same as reference.

Fregean Semantics

According to Frege, the meaning of an expression consists of two elements: a “referent” and what he called a “sense.” Both the *referent* and the *sense* of an expression contribute systematically to the “truth value” of the sentences in which the expression occurs.

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Frege pointed out that the substitution of co-referring expressions in a sentence does not always preserve truth value. If *Smith does not know that George Washington was the first president of the United States*, then *Smith believes that George Washington chopped down a cherry tree* can be true while *Smith believes that the first president of the United States chopped down a cherry tree* is false. Frege's explanation of this phenomenon was that, in sentences such as these, truth value is determined not only by *reference* but also by *sense*. The sense of an expression, roughly speaking, is not the thing the expression refers to but the way in which it refers to that thing. The sense of an expression determines what the expression refers to. Although each sense determines a single referent, a single referent may be determined by more than one sense. Thus, *George Washington* and *The First President of the United States* have the same referent but different senses. The two belief sentences can differ in truth value because, although both are about the same individual, the expressions referring to him pick him out in different ways.

Verificationist Semantics

Frege did not address the problem of how linguistic expressions come to have the meanings they do. A natural, although vague, answer is that expressions mean what they do because of what speakers do with them. An example of this approach is provided by the school of logical positivism, which was developed by members of the Vienna Circle discussion group in the 1920s and '30s. According to the logical positivists, the meaning of a sentence is given by an account of the experiences on the basis of which the sentence could be verified. Sentences that are unverifiable through any possible experience (including many ethical, religious, and metaphysical sentences) are literally meaningless.

The basic idea underlying verificationism is that meaning results from links between language and experience. Some sentences have meaning because they are definable in terms of other sentences, but ultimately there must be certain basic sentences, what the logical positivists called "observation sentences," whose meaning derives from their direct connection with experience and specifically from the fact that they are reports of experience. The meaning of an expression smaller than a sentence is similarly dependent

on experience. Roughly speaking, the meaning of an expression is given by an account of the experiences on the basis of which one could verify that the expression applies to one thing or another. Although the circumstances in which triangular and trilateral apply are the same, speakers go about verifying those applications in different ways.

The case against verificationism was most passionately pressed in the 1950s by the American philosopher Willard Van Orman Quine. He argued that experience cannot be used to verify individual observation sentences, because any experience can be taken to verify a given observation sentence provided that sufficient adjustments are made in the truth values of the other sentences that make up the scientific theory in which the sentence is embedded. In the case of word meaning, Quine asked: What experience, or empirical evidence, could determine what a word means? He contended that the only acceptable evidence is behavioral, given the necessity that meanings be public. But behavioral evidence cannot determine whether a person's words mean one thing or another; alternative interpretations, each compatible with all the behavioral evidence, will always be available. (For example, what possible behavioral evidence could determine that by "Gavagai" a speaker means "Rabbit" rather "undetached rabbit part" or "time-slice of a rabbit"?) From the determination under of meaning by empirical evidence, Quine inferred that there is no "fact of the matter" regarding what a word means.

Semantics: Quine's Theory of Meaning:

A semantic theory is a theory of the semantic facts that emphasize the structure of language. The theory represents the semantic structures which include such structures which account for how the words and sentences are related to the world and how they are semantically evaluated as meaningful. Thus semantics presupposed the basic vocabulary of language consisting of words and the logical connectives with the help of which sentences can be formed. There is relativity among word-object-language. It means that word stands for objects and language is consisting of sentences which stand for thought. Studies of the semantics reference turn out to make sense only when directed upon substantially our language, from within. Semantic holism is that every word has meaning only in relation to other words, sentences, or the language in which it is used. For

example, semantic holists would argue that the word “tree” does not always refer to the same object for everyone. More specifically, if I say “All trees have green leaves” and you say “No trees have green leaves”, there is not necessarily a disagreement. Both of us could simply be referring to different concepts of a tree. Atomism, on the other hand, would claim that one of us is wrong. Either my statement “all trees have green leaves” is false, or “No trees have green leaves” is false. Holism is the idea that something can be more than the sum of its parts; more specifically holism usually refers to the whole reality. It contends that one must understand reality as a whole; that one can’t start by examining the parts of reality and end up with an accurate picture. It can be contrasted with atomism, which is the idea that everything can be broken down into smaller parts. For example, a *duck* is more than simply a collection of “*duck parts*”, and thus we cannot break a *duck* down into “*duck parts*” and end up with an accurate picture of a *duck*.

According to Quine to get the meaning of a statement we have to understand the meaning of the whole body of statements because the meaning of the statement depends upon the bundle of other related statements which belongs to a system. So Quine rejected the logical positivist’s atomistic view of meaning theory. Conclusively he introduced a new theory of meaning which is called the holistic theory.

The Theory of Meaning Holism:

According to the common view, meaning holism is the thesis that what a linguistic expression means depends on its relations to many or all other expressions within the same totality. Meaning holism is a theory which brings out the conceptual relations among expressions in a language. The term meaning holism stands for a semantic thesis. According to this thesis, meaning accrues to the whole body of sentences and not to the single sentences. The meaning holistic ideas were introduced into analytic philosophy in the early 1950s in work by Carl Gustav Hempel in 1950 and Williard Van Orman Quine in 1951. Both of them were concerned with the meaning of theoretical sentences within the formulation of a scientific theory. Hempel articulated an idea of interdependence among expressions. They have stated that, to know the meaning of a hypothesis within an empirical language, we have to know not merely what observational sentences it entails alone or in conjunction with subsidiary hypothesis, but

also we have to know what non-observational, empirical sentences are entailed by it. Then one would be able to confirm or disconfirm the theory.⁸

Different Views of Holism:

According to Hempel, the above mentioned holism is called confirmation holism or epistemological holism. Hempel's idea was a way of accounting both theoretical sentences as well as observational sentence together. It is sometime called confirmation holism or epistemological holism.

According to Wilfrid Sellar, the meaning of an expression is determined by the set of rules governing the kinds of 'moves' that can be made with it in the game. He says that there are three kinds of move;

- a). Language entry moves (which lead from observation to the acceptance of a sentence).
- b). Intra-language moves (which are inferential transitions from sentences to a sentence).
- c). Language exit moves (which lead from accepted sentences to action).

Sellar's view is that sameness of meaning consists in sameness of role in a language game.

Harman and others have defended conceptual role or inferential role semantics. In a narrower sense, inferential role semantics is concerned with the meaning of sentences only, and identifies it with its role in a set of correct or accepted inference patterns, whereas conceptual role semantics is concerned also with sub-sentential expressions and with their roles not only in inferences proper, but also roles in relation to perception and action. According to Harman and Block, the theories are concerned with mental language, which is a system of mental representations having its own syntax like structure. Again, the holistic element consists in the idea that the conceptual role of a

⁸ Peter Pagin, "Meaning Holism" in, *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of language*, (ed) by E. Lepore and B. Smith Oxford University Press, 2001, pp.213-215.

mental reorientation relates it directly or indirectly to all or at least many other mental representations in the same system, and meaning is determined by the conceptual role.⁹

According to Donald Davidson's, theory of radical interpretation a correct semantic theory for the language of a particular speaker is a theory that results from methodologically correct interpretation of the utterances of that speaker. Such interpretation is holistic in the sense that only whole theories can be tested by the interpretation method.¹⁰

According to Wittgenstein, the use of language explains what language is all about. He says that understanding the language means understanding the rule as well as the purposes of linguistic activities, purposive activities etc. So Wittgenstein says:

*“What we call “understanding language” is often like understanding we get of a calculus when we learn its history or its practical application. And there too we meet an easily survivable symbolism instead of one that is strange to us. Imagine that someone had originally learnt chess as a writing game. And was later shown the “interpretation” of chess as a board game. In this case “to understand” means something like ‘to take in as a whole’”.*¹¹

Quine's Theory of Meaning Holism:

According to Quine, “the meaning of the individual expression depends on the totality to which they belongs is called meaning holism”. Thus under Quinean holism, the knowledge of the content of a sentence requires knowledge of the entire language to which the sentence belongs. For example: suppose we want to know the meaning of ‘snow’, then first we have to know some related sentences in which the word ‘snow’ is used. Quine suggested that the cognitive output is stored in language and the sensory

⁹Mark Greenberg and Gilbert Harman, “Conceptual Role Semantics” in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Language*, (ed.) by E. Lepore and B. Smith, Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 295-298.

¹⁰ Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1984, pp.220-223

¹¹Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigation*, Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 1953, pp.21-30.

output is distributed throughout the discourse. So there is no compartmentalization involved in understanding meaning. Therefore meaning goes holistic.¹²

Types of Meaning Holism

According to Quine, basically holism can be divided into two kinds:

1. Moderate Holism:

According to Quine, a speaker is always in the position of someone who hears a sentence not all of whose words he knows; then he guesses the meaning thereby having a conjectural understanding of the sentences.

For example: suppose a beggar is putting his hand on his belly so here we can understand that perhaps he is hungry, so we give some food or money. Therefore in this context, we can understand the whole thing about a beggar without asking him any other things.

2. Radical Holism:

According to Quine, a speaker wants to know the meaning of the term but he cannot understand the meaning of the term. So in this context he has to understand the meaning of the term by understanding the meaning of the sentence to which the term belongs. Radical Holism holds that no word can have any meaning except in the sentence which has meaning. Only sentences have meaning.¹³

Argument for the Meaning Holism:

Quine's confirmation holism brings in verifications as an argument for meaning holism. This argument is that verification is not piece-meal but holistic. There are two related arguments which have been presented by Fodor and Lepore. The first one is that

¹² Michael Dummett and Richard G. Heck, Jr. (ed.), *Language, Thought, and logic*, Oxford University Press, 1997, pp.71-80.

¹³ W. V. O. Quine, *Word and Object*, The M.I.T. Press. USA, 1960.

inferential role semantics is holistic. The second one is belief holism with respect to beliefs. The following are the arguments for meaning holism:

- a. The meaning of an expression is partially constituted by the expressions' inferential relations.
- b. There is no principle for distinguishing between those of its inferential relations that constitute the meaning of an expression and those that does not constitute the meaning of an expression.

For instance: For each proposition *P*, there is a proposition *Q*, such that if *Nagesh* believes *P* and *Girish* believes *P* the *Nagesh* must believes *Q* and *Girish* must believes *Q*.

- c. Here the meaning of an expression is constituted by all of its inferential relations hence by its entire function in a language.¹⁴

According to Later Wittgenstein, it is the semantic framework that promises to bring all structural elements of language under a single framework of language-use and the grammar of language. The meaning of a language can be situated in language-use. He suggested that meaning ultimately boils down to the use of word or sentence in language. Regarding semantic theory, He says that a word is fully functional when it is operating in a sentence. It is because in the sentence it is used according to rules. In this case therefore meaning cannot be anything other than what the word does. Meaning cannot stand apart as something unfamiliar to the word. Wittgenstein says:

*“The meaning of a word is what is explained by the explanation of the meaning”,
i.e., if you want to understand the use of the word “meaning”, look for what are
called “explanations of meaning”.*

¹⁴ John Perry, “Fodor and Lepore on Holism” in *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, Springer, Stanford University, USA, Vol. 73, 1994, pp. 123-138

As a result we cannot go out of language to tell what the meaning is. So we have to look into the function of language to know its meaning. Meaning is neither a mental reality nor it is entity in the abstract Platonic sense. It is ultimately a reality in language. It is internal to the language-system. All that is suggested that a word or a sentence has a role in the language and this explanation what meaning it has. Meaning cannot be separated from the language itself. The theory presented here is holistic as it holds that meaning is not an isolated phenomenon at all. The whole language is better than a particular bit of language to get an appropriate meaning. For example: the meaning of “atom” can be known when we study the whole theory of atoms. Thus there is a reason to believe that language and meaning work holistically.¹⁵

Therefore, the argument is that meaning holism provides the only way of securing standard meanings which are derived from the inferential relations of the expressions in a language.

Conclusion:

We have come to the last phase of our inquiry which enables us to make some significant remarks. We have seen in the light of a new theory of meaning is *Meaning Holism* which is propounded by W. V. O. Quine. The meaningfulness or meaning of the statements can be better understood by considering statements in the holistic manner. Regarding semantics holism a word is fully functional when it is operating in a sentence. Because in the sentence it is used according to rules. Quine in his characteristic style says that the meaning of any statement can be understood, determined or known only when we analyze that statement holistically. It means that the statement must be considered for meaning only as belonging to a system of statements. It is like that a statement has its content as part of a calculus. The meaning is the role of the word in the calculus. Hence we can approach language and meaning holistically rather than atomistically.

¹⁵ R. C. Pradhan, *Recent Developments in Analytic Philosophy*, ICPR, New Delhi, 2001, pp.240-241.

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