

Utterance Interpretation without Utterance Meaning

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Abstract. It is commonly taken for granted that an important task of a theory of meaning is to tell what determines the meaning of an utterance. The two basic positions are intentionalism and anti-intentionalism, the former situating the instance of determinacy in the speaker S's intention and the latter in features accessible to the hearer H. In this paper I argue that the interpretive practice of S and H lends support to neither intentionalism nor anti-intentionalism, but rather suggests that the notion of utterance meaning is dispensable. I outline what I take to be the three options at stake in utterance interpretation and show that none of them presupposes recourse to the objectively correct interpretation of the utterance.

Keywords. Utterance Interpretation, Utterance meaning, What is Said, Intentionalism, Contextualism, subjective truth conditions, semantics, pragmatics.

1. Introduction

Many linguists and philosophers of language take as an important task of a theory of meaning to tell what determines the meaning of an utterance. If only because of indexicals, utterance meaning cannot be equated with sentence meaning. Most of these theorists are concerned with the propositional or semantic component of utterance meaning only, i.e. what is said. From the viewpoint which I will develop here however there is no reason not to include also pragmatic components of meaning, such as implicatures. Accordingly I will use 'utterance meaning' as

something equivalent to Grice's notion of the 'total signification of a remark', even though most of the discussion will be concerned with semantic content.

Theorists assume that there is such a thing as the meaning of an utterance and that it is settled in a definite manner, so that there is an objectively correct interpretation of the utterance. The question is which factors go into determining utterance meaning, on what grounds or through which mechanism utterance meaning is determined. The two basic positions are intentionalism and anti-intentionalism and theorists argue their position by reference to intuitions about content in particular cases and general considerations about the nature of language or communication. The issue is as yet not settled.

In this paper I will argue that the interpretive interaction between the speaker S and the hearer H supports neither intentionalism nor anti-intentionalism, but rather suggests that there is no objective fact of the matter as to the meaning of an utterance. I will outline what I take to be the three options at stake in utterance interpretation: H may be concerned with 1) what S wanted to convey or 2) what S was most reasonably taken to convey or 3) what S could be imagined to convey. None of the options presupposes any such thing as the actual meaning of the utterance. In so far as these options exhaust our interpretive practice with utterances, there seems to be no reason for positing the category of utterance meaning. The dispensability of objective truth conditions has been argued before [1,2,3,4], but mostly with respect to demonstrative reference. I extend the argument to utterance interpretation in general and I also ground the rejection of utterance meaning in a general account of interpretive practice understood as the interaction between S and H.

Before outlining the three options at stake in utterance interpretation, I will give a short overview of the debate between intentionalism and anti-intentionalism.

2. The Debate between Intentionalism and Anti-Intentionalism

The debate between intentionalism and anti-intentionalism takes cases of divergence between S's intended meaning and H's assigned meaning as its starting point. That is natural, since when H's interpretation matches S's intention, it does not make a difference whether we take an intentionalist or anti-intentionalist stance. It is in cases of divergence that we may feel the need of a verdict as to the actual meaning of the utterance which adjudicates between S's and H's differing claims. Perry, for instance, asks:

"We are pretty clear about what he [S] intended to say, and what he was understood as saying. But what did he say?" [5]

Intentionalists consider S's intention to be the instance of determinacy. Fundamentally, an utterance means what S wants to communicate by it. Some theorists allow S's intention a large amount of liberty [6,7,8]. For most theorists

however S's meaning should be constrained, in order not to allow the meaning of an utterance to be just whatever the speaker wants or pretends to communicate by it. Humpty Dumpty may be circumvented either by a stipulated conformity to conventional meaning, so that the meaning of an utterance is what S intended it to be, as long as the intention is compatible with the linguistic or compositional meaning of the utterance. But perhaps a more popular account is to regulate S's intentions by constraints operating on the formation of intentions themselves. Communicative intentions, no more than intentions in general, cannot be formed without a reasonable expectation of success on S's part of making herself understood [9,10,11,12]. S's utterance means what S intends it to mean, provided that S is in a position to reasonably expect H to be able to grasp her intended meaning.

According to anti-intentionalism, on the other hand, the meaning of an utterance is the meaning which is made manifest by public features available to H. Fundamentally, an utterance means what it is reasonably taken to mean by H. For some anti-intentionalists utterance meaning is firmly settled by conventional meaning [13] or strictly objective factors such as demonstrations [14,15,16]. But many anti-intentionalists let all sorts of contextual cues enter into consideration, such as salience [17], common ground, discourse topic, coherence relations [18], all things considered judgments [19,20,21]. Anti-intentionalists are certainly not against intentions; the important lesson for S is to speak in such a way that her intended meaning coincides with the meaning made manifest to H.

Aspects of these two basic approaches may be combined to form diverse intermediate positions, such as the hybrid account [22] and the coordination account [23].

In order to test their proposals, theorists concoct cases of divergence and try to elicit our intuitions as to the actual meaning of the utterance. These intuitions are supported by quite general assumptions about the nature of language and communication. Intentionalists tend to emphasize the general purpose of communication, the structure of thought and belief, H's submitting to S's declarations of intention. Anti-intentionalists, on the other hand, stress the importance of H's access to meaning, S's accountability and our appreciation of the distinction between what S wanted to communicate and what actually was communicated. The theorist's position seems to depend heavily upon her assumptions about what purpose utterances serve in our practice with them. Either an utterance is basically in the service of getting S's message across to H or an utterance is basically something which puts S in a position with normative implications [24]. Some theorists sympathize with S's perspective, other theorists sympathize with H's perspective. It is only to be expected then that at present there is no decisive arguments to be found in support of any of the positions.

In order to be a little more concrete, let us look at a case invented by Perry and the way he accounts for it:

“The man across the street, whom I take to be George W. Bush [and who is not GWB], is tossing pretzles in the air and catching them in his mouth. I point to him and tell my grandson, ‘President Bush is tossing pretzles in his mouth. That’s very dangerous.’ I intended to refer to the man across the street by referring to George W. Bush, which I knew I could do by saying ‘President Bush.’ The directing intention (now extended to proper names) was to refer to that man I think of when I think ‘George W. Bush;’ the expected upshot was to refer to the man across the street; I planned to refer to the man across the street by referring to President Bush. But I failed; I referred to President Bush and quite possibly said something false about him.” [25]

Perry’s view is an instance of the conflicting intentions account [26,27,28,29,30]. According to this account, our use of linguistic items may be associated with a complex set of intentions, one of which settles the meaning of the utterance. S has the intention to refer to the man across the street and also the intention to refer to GWB and it is the latter intention which the reference depends on. This is of course a possible account and it has the advantage of circumventing a plausible counterexample to intentionalism. Nevertheless, though the conclusion is presented in a matter of fact manner, there is no matter of fact as to what S referred to. The conclusion is the result of a decision as to what to count as the referent. It is because Perry presupposes that proper names do not refer to entities other than their bearers that he affirms that the intention to refer to the man across the street is trumped by S’s use of the proper name GWB. It is because Perry presupposes that utterance meaning is tied to S’s intentions that he seeks to account for this by means of an analysis of S’s intentions. And finally it is because Perry presupposes there is such a thing as utterance meaning that he wants to pass a verdict as to what was referred to.

Perry says without further argument that any concept of utterance meaning which is not tied to S’s intentions ‘isn’t quite the concept we need for semantics’ [31]. The semantic concept of utterance meaning should, he believes, be concerned with the structure of the S’s thoughts and beliefs. But is it not perfectly possible to describe S’s intentions without passing any verdict as to what was actually said by S’s utterance?

I will now set out to describe the three basic options at stake in utterance interpretation. The interpretive practice of S and H actually does equal justice to the perspectives of intentionalism and anti-intentionalism without invoking any notion of the actual meaning of the utterance.

3. Opting for Intended Meaning

When confronted with an utterance by S, H naturally sets out, using the linguistic material of the sentence uttered and diverse contextual cues as evidence, to discover S’s intended meaning. This is certainly the fundamental attitude in utterance

interpretation. In very many cases H's search for S's intended meaning will reach its goal, simply because S used linguistic material and exploited contextual cues in such a way that the utterance in its context provided ready access to her intention. Some theorists want to explain this convergence between S's intended meaning and H's assigned meaning by their coinciding with a third entity, namely the meaning of the utterance. But convergence could of course be well explained by the simple coincidence of the original two entities [32]. The need for actual utterance meaning is felt more pressing in cases of non convergence or divergence between S's intended meaning and H's assigned meaning. It is in these cases it might seem we would need to know which or whose meaning represents the correct interpretation and where it makes a difference whether we take an intentionalist or anti-intentionalist stance.

3.1. Cases of Compatibility

In cases where S's intended meaning is licensed by the linguistic material, it is often suggested that S's intention settles the meaning of the utterance, as, e.g., in this remark by MacFarlane:

“It seems to me that if we wanted to settle, for example, whether Nunberg's waitress had asserted that a *sandwich* had left, or that a *person* who ordered a sandwich had left, we might ask which (if either) of these propositions she meant to commit herself to. To answer this question is to settle what she asserted.” [33]

Is it true that H's asking for S's intention amounts to settling the meaning of the utterance? Does this procedure permit us to pronounce on, e.g., what S asserted? Actually I think it is difficult to hold that asking for intended meaning implies that H is taking S's intention to settle utterance meaning or that she is concerned with any such thing as utterance meaning. H's submitting to S's intention amounts to no more than H's opting for S's intended meaning.

In order for anyone to claim that S's intention settles the meaning of an ambiguous utterance, it seems that it must first of all be made clear that H, in asking for S's intention, is concerned with the meaning of the original utterance at all. Some locutions used in such situations certainly do suggest that H asks for factual information about the original utterance and its meaning. But others are more readily taken as invitations to make a novel utterance. If this latter attitude is taken as fundamental the practice of asking for S's intention would not amount to settling the meaning of the original utterance by means of S's intention, but rather to, as it were, erasing the original utterance and replacing it by a novel utterance which H understands, in its own right, to S's satisfaction. There is communicative success in the case of the novel utterance, whereas the original utterance is left behind.

An immediate objection to this alternative analysis might be that in many cases the novel utterance cannot be understood unless it is related to the original utterance and therefore the novel utterance does not simply replace the original utterance. The fact

that many clarification utterances are elliptical would suggest that clarifications rather serve as elucidations of the meaning of the original utterance than as utterances in their own right. But the fact that material has to be recovered from the original utterance before it is erased does not, in itself, tell that we are concerned with the meaning of the original utterance. This hardly prevents us from construing what happens at the fundamental level as erasure and replacement of the original utterance.

Another thing which must be made clear in order for S's intention to be said to constitute the meaning of the utterance is that S is reliable in reporting her intention. S may have forgotten or be insincere about her original intention. A simply alleged intention cannot settle the meaning of the utterance. Ordinarily however H does not proceed at ascertaining S's reliability concerning her original intention. H's unconcern with S's reliability also speaks in favour of construing the practice of asking for S's intention as an invitation to S to tell whatever she wants H to go along with.

These considerations may not dispel H's strong intuition that her asking for S's intention is concerned with the meaning of the original utterance. But then H should be able to claim that she goes along with S's intended meaning because it constitutes as a matter of fact and by the very principles of semantics the meaning of the utterance and not simply because she is invited by S to go along with this meaning. As long as H cannot make good that claim, I cannot see how her claim to be dealing with the meaning of the utterance and not just S's intended meaning can be substantiated.

3.2. Cases of Confusion

What are we to say about cases where some of the linguistic and contextual facts speak against S's intended meaning? Consider Perry's case above or Kaplan's Carnap picture case:

"Suppose that without turning and looking I point to the place on my wall which has long been occupied by a picture of Rudolf Carnap and I say:

(1) [That] is a picture of one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century.

But unbeknownst to me, someone has replaced my picture of Carnap with one of Spiro Agnew." [34]

Theorists ask what the meaning of the utterance would be in such a case. Is it settled by S's intention or by what is available to H? Since it is taken as counterintuitive to say S's intention to refer to the Carnap picture settles the meaning of the utterance here, intentionalists, as we saw above, work out accounts of demonstrative reference according to which it corresponds to a complex set of intentions. S has the intention to refer to Carnap, but also to the picture behind her and it is this latter intention which is determinative. Contrary to first appearances, the meaning of the utterance is settled by S's intention after all.

But why should the scenario be interrupted at this point? Let us instead look at H's plausible reaction. The evidence points in diverging directions. S points at a man who

is not GWB, yet uses the name GWB; S points at a politician yet talks of him as a philosopher. In the face of such confusion, H will be uncertain about whom S wants to refer to. Presumably, H will handle the case in a way very much similar to the way she handles ambiguity: H will ask S to what or whom she wanted to refer and go along with the answer. And if it is not possible to obtain this information from S, H would most probably ask herself what S wanted to refer to, not what was actually referred to. The conflicting intentions account, though it certainly contributes to clarifying the structure of S's intentions, provides an answer to a question never asked by H.

3.3. Humpty Dumpty Cases

There are also cases where H takes S's utterance in a certain way, but later is made aware that S wanted to say something different. Linguistic conventions, various circumstantial facts and pragmatic principles may speak against S's intended meaning. As a matter of fact, *glory* doesn't mean 'nice knock down argument' nor does *epitaph* mean 'epigraph'; actually a picture of Spiro Agnew was pointed at and a proper name refers to its bearer and not to some man across the street; the contextual features clearly indicated the riverside sense of *bank*; asserting that there is a gas station, in these circumstances, actually amounts to implicating that it is open and has petrol to sell.

I will come back to the cases where H wants to enforce her interpretation. For the moment, I note that as long as H – despite being convinced that she is not at fault for having understood the original utterance the way she did, but rather that S is at fault – nevertheless is prepared to erase and replace the original utterance and go along with S's intended meaning, the issue as to the objective utterance meaning does not arise. In so far as H's ultimate interest is in S's intention, there is no reason for H to pass any verdict as to utterance meaning. The linguistic and other facts are real, but they have no immediate implications for any such thing as utterance meaning, except by stipulation. The facts by themselves indicate at most that H may have had the best reasons not to arrive at S's intended meaning. S and H are not concerned with settling the meaning of the original utterance, but agree on going along with the novel utterance. Even though it is not clear exactly how far-reaching Dodgson's sympathy for Humpty Dumpty was, I think he well captures the spirit of H's attitude when he says:

“I meekly accept his [S's] ruling, however injudicious I may think it.” [35]

3.4. Summary

H opts for S's intended meaning in a variety of cases. In some cases the intention is fully licensed by the linguistic material, in other cases various facts may speak against the intention. But as long as H's goal is to discover S's intention, there is no reason for her to care about any other meaning than the one S intended.

4. Opting for Most Reasonable Meaning

Opting for S's intended meaning is not H's only option in utterance interpretation. In some cases of divergence between S's intended meaning and H's assigned meaning, H will not be prepared, when S's intention is eventually made manifest to her, to erase the original utterance and replace it with whatever S wants her to go along with. It certainly does happen that H takes S's original utterance more seriously, as it were. H may be interested not in S's intention, but in her own favoured interpretation; those are cases where H wants to enforce her interpretation. Does H in such cases impose her own interpretation, in distinction to S's intended meaning, *qua* the meaning of the utterance?

4.1. Actual or Most Reasonable Meaning?

It is certainly true that the dispute between S and H in cases where H does not opt for S's intended meaning may take the appearance of a disagreement as to the actual meaning of the utterance. H may put her refusal to opt for S's intention in the following manner, for instance: 'That is certainly what you wanted to say, but that is not what you actually did say', thereby seemingly appealing to a distinction between S's intended meaning and the meaning of S's utterance. S may protest that her utterance means what she meant by it and could not mean something she did not mean. H may then tell S that the meaning of an utterance does not depend on the thoughts and beliefs which occurred in S's mind at the moment of utterance, but on the objective and accessible features of the context. Since it is not impossible to find a counterpart to the theoretical debate between intentionalism and anti-intentionalism in actual interpretive activity, is it not necessary to find the objective standard and pass a verdict as to the correct interpretation of the utterance?

But why should H claim that her interpretation corresponds to the meaning of the utterance? Is not sufficient for her to claim merely that she had good reasons to take S's utterance the way she did? That is something which could be conceded by S, whatever her convictions about utterance meaning.

For the determination of the most reasonable meaning S's intention is simply irrelevant. The question under consideration is which meaning H had reasons to

assign to the utterance and S's intention as such, inaccessible as it is to H, cannot enter into consideration. The question is precisely what the utterance was most reasonably taken to mean irrespective of what it was intended to mean. This does not imply of course that S on her side cannot try to enforce her intended meaning. It will not be by a simple declaration of intention, but by pointing to features of the context which might have put H on the track of the intended meaning. S may argue that though her meaning may have appeared to be the one assigned by H, paying a closer attention to the circumstances of the utterance would have made S's actual intention manifest to H or that the literal meaning of the utterance does not support the inference made by H or S may concede that her pointing was faulty, but since everybody else in the audience had no problems with identifying the object in question, H's interpretation is not reasonable.

H, on the other hand, cannot enforce her interpretation by simply telling S how she as a matter of fact took the utterance. She must argue that she had good reasons to take the utterance the way she did, even that her interpretation was the most reasonable one. Most reasonable here does not amount to most reasonable in an absolute sense, for given that the utterance was made with address to H, it is H's perspective which is at stake; it is a matter of the most reasonable interpretation from H's point of view. Which features of H's point of view are to be taken into account is not, however, just up to H. H should be able to claim that her interpretation is in agreement with what any reasonable interpreter in her position would have taken as the meaning. The most reasonable interpretation is a matter of discussion, negotiation and consideration of diverse linguistic and contextual details [36]. It is not a matter of mechanism or conceptual determination. Whereas it seems difficult for S and H to reach an agreement as long as they claim to be concerned with the meaning of the utterance, it seems that it is at least in principle perfectly possible for them to agree on what the most reasonable interpretation is.

4.2. Accountability

Typically H's refusal to erase the original utterance depends on its having, in H's favoured interpretation, normative consequences for which H wants to hold S responsible. H thinks that S by her utterance, e.g., committed herself to something's being the case or to performing a future action and should act accordingly. Some theorists think that accountability depends on there being an actual meaning of the utterance and also that it speaks in favour of an anti-intentionalist conception of utterance meaning. Our actual practice suggests however that both S and H take responsibility to be tied to the most reasonable interpretation of S's utterance. This is most clearly seen in the case of offensive utterances.

It may happen that S makes an utterance which makes H offended. Typically, S will deny having had any intention to say something offensive. Why, in these cases,

does not H submit to S's alleged intention as she is prepared to do in so many other cases and get rid of the offence? Is it because H is convinced that S is insincere about her communicative intention? Or is H convinced that S's declaration of intention does not matter when it comes to the meaning of an utterance? If one looks at how people actually motivate their petitions for resigning or charges of defamation, one will find statements going in both directions. Some statements are concerned with S's actual intention, H's being convinced that the utterance betrays S's true racist or sexist character. Other statements are concerned with the meaning of the utterance as something settled by history and tradition and other contextual features for which S's intention does not enter into account.

Let us consider another typical feature of these cases. Insisting that her intended meaning was not offensive and denying to be the kind of person having the prerequisite attitudes for making such an offense, S will nevertheless apologize for H's being offended. Thus, S herself ties her responsibility not to her intended meaning nor to the actual meaning of the utterance, but simply to the reasonable interpretation of her utterance. S acknowledges the reasonableness of H's interpretation and her own responsibility for that interpretation. For this reason it seems that any claims on H's part as to S's actual intention or the actual meaning of utterance are superfluous. What should matter to H is that she is offended, that her reasons for being offended are recognized as justified and that S takes her responsibility. S's apology is a step on the way.

Informal apologies are sometimes felt not to be to the level of the offense brought about. H may want to bring S to justice. Criminal liability usually requires *actus reus* and *mens rea*. As for the *actus reus*, courts establish what the most reasonable interpretation of the utterance is. It may happen that they label this the actual utterance meaning, but that label does not serve any particular purpose. The *mens rea* is particularly difficult to establish in the case of utterances, for which often the only available evidence of the communicative intention is the utterance itself. Courts generally impute the guilty mind objectively on the basis that a reasonable person would have had the guilty intention or should have foreseen that the utterance would be taken as offensive. It seems clear then that courts hold S responsible for the most reasonable interpretation of her utterance. A nice example is provided by the 1633 proceedings against Presbyterian reformer William Prynne who was charged with seditious libel for having published a book entitled *Histrionastix* taken to denounce in an implicit manner the royal family's interest in theatrical performances. Prynne of course affirmed that he had had no such intention, in response to which the judges wrote:

"Itt is said, hee had noe ill intencion, noe ill harte, but hee maye bee ill interpreted. That must not bee allowed him in excuse, for he should not have written any thinge that would beare construccion, for hee doth not accompanye hos booke, to make his intencion knowne to all that reades it." [37]

4.3. Summary

The notion of utterance meaning is often invoked precisely when it comes to accountability. It is claimed that S's responsibility depends on the meaning of our utterances. It seems however that our real disputes concerning utterances and accountability do not at all depend on settling the actual meaning of the utterance. Only the reasonableness of H's interpretation is at stake. What S is responsible for is not the meaning of the utterance, but the most reasonable interpretation of the utterance.

5. Opting for Imagined Meaning

We have so far considered H's opting for S's intended meaning and H's opting for the most reasonably assigned meaning, but there is yet another option in utterance interpretation.

S points to the man across the street, who is not GWB, and says: 'President Bush is tossing pretzels in his mouth'. In such a case, H may of course start laughing: 'Bush tossing pretzels in his mouth!'. A confused utterance could serve as an occasion for merriment.

What is fun here? Is it that S actually said that GWB is tossing pretzels in his mouth? Is it the meaning of the utterance which makes H laugh? But is it really necessary to settle the meaning of the utterance in order to laugh? H may laugh at what she imagines that S wanted to say or that someone wanted to say or at what she imagines that she had taken S to say or that someone had taken S to say.

Opting for imagined meaning is a matter of wit. The imagined meaning should not be unreasonable. We do not laugh if the imagined meaning is too far fetched; generally the imagined meaning should be something S conceivably could have meant. There must be some reasonable connection between the imagined meaning and the linguistic material and the contextual cues, yet the imagined meaning does not represent the most reasonable interpretation.

6. Conclusion

If these three options exhaust our interpretive practice with utterances, then the notion of utterance meaning is dispensable. In most cases of interaction between S and H, utterance meaning is not invoked. In the cases where it seems to be invoked or even explicitly is invoked, it is better dispensed with. S's and H's purposes in utterance interpretation are perfectly served without their committing to the existence of utterance meaning. The question as to what determines the meaning of an utterance – whether it is S's intention or contextual cues available to H or some combination of

intentions and contextual cues or some one of S's intentions – is idle from the viewpoint of S's and H's interpretive practice. S and H are concerned with 1) what S wanted to convey, 2) what S was most reasonably taken to convey or 3) what S could be imagined to convey.

It may be objected that the issue of utterance meaning was not a practical issue, but a theoretical one and therefore S's and H's interaction is irrelevant. The theoretical question is what to count as the meaning of the utterance. The point of the above investigation into practice was that there is no reason to count anything as any such thing as the meaning of the utterance.

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