

Paul Elbourne

Meaning: A Slim Guide to Semantics.

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Philosophy of language has recently undergone a ‘linguistics turn’, in which the most interesting contemporary philosophical work on language has been informed by, or is in some cases indistinguishable from, research in contemporary linguistics. Elbourne’s book is in the ‘Oxford Linguistics’ series and it provides an excellent introduction to central topics in the philosophy of language shaped by the linguistics turn. Chapters 1–3 concern features of word meaning, Chapters 4–6 consider sentence meaning, and Chapters 7 and 8 discuss the interaction of meaning and context and the relation between language and thought, respectively.

Philosophers unfamiliar with the linguistics turn in the philosophy of language will find some aspects of Elbourne’s introduction to meaning unorthodox. For example, he favors an internalist account of word meaning according to which word meanings are concepts, located in our heads, and he doesn’t flinch from the standard worry that such a view poses problems for shared meaning and communication. On the contrary, the fact that the internalist theory does not guarantee communication seems to align with evidence of both interpersonal and intrapersonal differences in grasp of the meanings of words (30–2). And some topics that once dominated discussions concerning the philosophy of language are only briefly mentioned. For example, skepticism about synonymy is dispatched in a paragraph after the introduction of a few examples of what appear to be synonymous expressions (‘napkin’ and ‘serviette’, ‘gorse’ and ‘furze’, 34). But this ‘slim guide’s’ shift in perspective on the nature of meaning is refreshing. It allows Elbourne both to discuss some standard topics such as the dispute between ‘referentialist’ and ‘internalist’ theories of word meaning and to examine some fascinating interactions between the study of meaning and neighboring disciplines like experimental psychology and neuroscience. In what follows, I will briefly summarize the contents of the book as a whole while dwelling longer on the elements that will appear most novel to philosophers.

The more familiar elements of Elbourne’s investigation of word meaning in chapters 1–3 cover the inadequacy of dictionary definitions as a systematic account of meaning (Ch. 1), and the advantages and disadvantages of ‘referentialist’ and ‘internalist’ theories of word meanings (Ch. 2), which includes a sketch of the tangle of metaphysical categories caught up in debates about what words might refer to (abstract objects, properties, etc.). Chapter 3 shifts focus from the debate over where to look in general for the meanings of words to consider the nature of synonymy, vagueness, and ambiguity of word meanings (whatever those meanings might be).

It is in his examination of ambiguity in Chapter 3 that Elbourne’s empirically informed approach to the study of meaning clearly emerges (38–42). There is an intuition that the multiple meanings of certain ambiguous words, like ‘column’, are more closely related to one another than the meanings of other ambiguous words like ‘bank’. Elbourne says that dictionaries capture the intuition by using separate entries for the unrelated meanings of ‘bank’ while the related meanings of ‘column’ have ‘just one entry with lots of subdivisions’ (37). An internalist about word meanings might maintain that a similar difference in structure exists in the mind, but it isn’t

obvious what evidence could support such a claim. But, surprisingly, Elbourne says that ‘light has been shed on this issue by brain imaging’ (38). He cites recent studies of ‘semantic priming’, where processing of word meaning is sped up when one sees a semantically related but phonologically unrelated word (‘paper’/‘magazine’), ‘phonological inhibition’, where processing is slowed down when one sees a homonym of particular word (‘river bank’/‘savings bank’, e.g.), and ‘repetition priming’, when processing is sped up when one sees the same word in quick succession, which provide evidence of a difference in structure. In brief, processing times for pairs of phrases like ‘lined paper’/‘liberal paper’ were quicker than when ‘liberal paper’ was preceded with an unrelated control. That provides confirmation of the intuition that the occurrences of ‘paper’ in both the phrase ‘lined paper’ and the phrase ‘liberal paper’ are not mere homonyms (since processing of a word is slowed down relative to a control when one sees a homonym of that word): instead, they are a single word with related meanings. This is a compelling demonstration of the relevance of findings from neighboring areas of inquiry to the study of meaning.

After discussing word meanings in Chapters 1–3, Elbourne turns to sentence meanings in Chapters 4–6. Chapter 4 concerns two candidates for the meanings of sentences: Russellian propositions and sets of possible worlds. Chapter 5 deals with entailment, presupposition (focusing on definite descriptions), and structural ambiguity. Chapter 6 tackles the nature of the compositionality of meaning, and explains how the meaning of certain expressions can be modeled as functions which take the meaning of expressions as inputs and yield the meaning of larger phrases as their outputs. As with the chapters on word meaning, Elbourne brings recent empirical discoveries in linguistics and related fields to bear on topics central to the philosophy of language. For example, traditional conceptual arguments for and against the idea that the meaning of sentences can be modeled as sets of possible worlds are combined with an argument that thinking of meaning as sets of possible worlds contributes to a powerful explanation of the behavior of so-called ‘negative polarity items’ (NPIs).

An NPI has to appear in a sentence together with an NPI-licensing phrase for the sentence to be grammatical. Compare the following sentences (the examples are from pp. 56–7):

- (1) No gods show any mercy to mortals
- (2) *Some gods show any mercy to mortals.

The unacceptability of (2) is due to the presence of the NPI ‘any’ without the presence of an NPI-licensing expression like ‘no’. There are other NPI-licensing expressions in English such as ‘at most three’ or ‘it is never the case that’. Elbourne describes an account (due to William Ladusaw) of what unites the phrases that serve as NPI-licensors in terms of downward entailment, which in turn is spelled out using the machinery of possible worlds (60–1). If successful, this explanation provides an example of how the ability to successfully predict a surprisingly diverse array of phenomena can lend some empirical support to abstract philosophical commitments.

Another thing to like about Elbourne’s introduction is his use of lively examples (drawn from law and politics as well as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*) to illustrate abstruse issues like the structural ambiguity of sentences and the interaction of meaning and context. For example, the discussion of structural ambiguity in Chapter 5 concludes with a demonstration of the practical

importance of semantics through a fascinating discussion of the crucial role played by a structural ambiguity in the Treason Act of 1351, one interpretation of which led to the hanging of Sir Richard David Casement in 1916. The discussion of different theories of how context shapes the semantic content of sentences in Chapter 7 is similarly made concrete by reference to the supreme court case of *Smith v. United States*, in which a drug dealer traded an automatic submachine gun to an undercover police officer for two ounces of cocaine (129) (the relevance of this case for debates about context sensitivity was first noted by Stephen Neale). The drug dealer was subject to a statute that held that crimes that involve a defendant who ‘uses’ a machine gun ‘during and in relation to’ drug trafficking is subject to a harsh thirty-year sentence. So did the defendant ‘use’ a machine gun when he traded it for drugs? The defense argued that the statute should be understood as prescribing the use of a firearm *as a weapon*, even though the words ‘as a weapon’ do not appear in the statute. This claim aligns with certain views of ‘implicit content’, where, in the right context, unpronounced material can be part of the content of what is said when a sentence is asserted. The Supreme Court, however, disagreed with the defense in a 6–3 decision. Might the court have been swayed with a more persuasive account of the complex ways that meaning and context interact?

Given that philosophy of language has taken the linguistics turn, philosophers wanting an updated look at central topics in philosophy of language should read this book. When combined with some of the further reading Elbourne suggests, it could also be used as a way of bringing an introductory philosophy of language course up to date with reference to current research and controversies. Elbourne writes lively prose and he conveys the sense that the contemporary study of meaning is rich, exciting and developing rapidly. My only substantial complaint is that I wanted more—philosophers would benefit from an empirically informed introduction to dynamic semantics, experimental pragmatics, the meaning of questions, imperatives, and so on. But such an introduction could no longer be a ‘slim guide’.

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