BUDAPEST SEMESTER IN COGNITIVE SCIENCE
PHIL305 PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE
October 7–11, 2013

Preview slides

Zsófia Zvolenszky
zvolenszky@elte.hu
What do we know when we hear a sentence of English and understand it? Various answers:

1. We know what the ingredient words mean and how they relate to things world—we know their semantic values.
2. We know how the semantic values of the ingredient words combine to give the semantic value(s) of the whole sentence.
3. We know (1) and (2), which allow us to know under what conditions the sentence is true.
4. We know what the speaker intends to get across, what she wants to communicate. (This sets far greater demands on understanding than what is involved (1), (2), and (3).)

A way to develop (1):

„I admire Mark Twain”

Understanding this takes, among other things:

• knowing that the word “I” refers to whoever the speaker is in the given conversational context, and
• knowing who that speaker is—to whom “I” refers on the given occasion.
During the course, our aim is to gain a greater understanding of the nature of meaning, and its relation to reference, truth, communication.

Meaning and reference give rise to various puzzles. We’ll be exploring several of these.
Consider one of Frege’s puzzles from 1892, which provides the starting point for contemporary philosophy of language and also for this course:

Our words, sentences are about—refer to—things in the world: objects, people, events. Plausibly, the meanings of expressions play a central role in explaining this referential feature: for example, it is in virtue of the meaning of the word ’horse’ that it refers to horses. But what exactly does this role played by meaning consist in? The answer is not at all straightforward. Consider these two sentences:

Mark Twain was a famous novelist.
Samuel Clemens was a famous novelist.

How does the meaning of the first sentence differ from the meaning of the second? After all, both are about the same individual: who was called Samuel Clemens but became famous under the pseudonym ‘Mark Twain’. Yet—according to Gottlob Frege—the two sentences cannot have the same meaning because someone may rationally believe one (the first, say), without believing the other.
In 1905, Russell wrote that a theory of logic [and language]:

“…may be tested by its capacity for dealing with puzzles, and it is a wholesome plan, in thinking about logic [and language], to stock the mind with as many puzzles as possible, since these serve much the same purpose as is served by experiments in physical science” (Russell “On Denoting”).

Frege’s puzzles were among those that Russell intended to resolve in the context of his theory about definite descriptions like “the author of Huckleberry Finn”.
First, why should we pursue questions about language (meaning, reference, truth, and so on)?

An answer from one of the great philosophers of the last 50 years: Michael Dummett

“Philosophy attempts, not to discover new truths about the world, but to gain a clear view of what we already know and believe about it. That depends upon attaining a more explicit grasp of the structure of our thoughts; and that in turn on discovering how to give a systematic account of the working of language, the medium in which we express our thoughts.”

According to Dummett: A clear view of human knowledge and beliefs requires grasping the structure of human thought, which in turn requires a systematic account of language.
Second, can we hope for ultimate answers to puzzles about language, including Frege’s?

An answer from another great philosopher of the last 50 years: Dorothy Edgington

“I was captivated by philosophy as soon as I discovered it. It’s a wonderfully anti-authoritarian subject, making you figure things out for yourself from the start, and to subject all ideas to severe criticism, including your own. It stretches the imagination to the limit. And it is an everlasting source of puzzles. The downside is that even on the rare occasions when you think you have managed to solve a problem, you never convince many others.”

During this course, we’ll follow Edgington’s lead in considering various responses to puzzles like Frege’s, subjecting them to severe criticism, seeing how convincing those responses are.