

The metaphysics of meaning I (and a small lesson from ancient philosophy).

Consider the following two sentences, (a) “Lory has a small nose.” and (b) “Lory has a small nose.” Are they different? As they are distinct physical strings of markings, e.g., the ink used in each sentence is different, the answer is yes. They are distinct sentence tokens. However, as they have the same word order and meaning, the answer is no. They say the same thing. They are the same sentence type. The distinction between sentences tokens and types allows both answers.

It is clear that each written sentence token above is a distinct string of physical markings, e.g., ink marks, chalk marks, etc., but what is a sentence type? If we try to write down this sentence type, e.g., by (c) “Lory’s nose is small.” then we have simply written down another sentence token. Indeed, any way of physically expressing this sentence type will result in another token. From this it follows that a sentence type is not just a string of physical marks. It must be something else. It could be some other kind of physical item or possibly something nonphysical. We need an argument to decide this matter.

So far, all we can say is that sentence types are not tokens, so we lack a positive characterization of them. It is clear that we know the common meaning, i.e. the sentence type, in the above three examples (a) through (c). If we look only at (a) and (b), it is clear that both have an identical word order and grammar, however, if we look also at (c), we see that this is no longer the case. If we look at what is most apparently common among (a) through (c), we might say that it is simply the English language meaning of these tokens. This is true, however, it cannot be generalized as a definition of sentence types. This can be seen by constructing a counterexample. Consider the following Italian language token: (d) “Lory ha un naso piccolo.” Tokens (a) through (d) have the same meaning. By having the same meaning, I simply mean that any situation that makes one of them true (or false), does the same for all the rest of them. We can conclude from counterexamples of this type, that meaning, is more general or abstract than any particular grammar or natural language. Oddly enough, while the particular words we use are embodied in a particular language and grammar and are unique to that language, meaning is not similarly bound. Indeed, meaning seems to “transcend” any particular natural language.

Following a tradition from Plato in ancient philosophy, we can go further to positively characterize sentence types. As they are clearly not particular strings of physical markings, the following argument goes further to conclude that they are not any kind of physical object, i.e., they must be non-physical:

1. Distinct sentence tokens (a) through (d) are strings of physical marks which have nothing in common physically with one another, but they do have a common meaning.
2. If 1., then there is some thing in common which they all share among them and this thing is non-physical, e.g., proposition (e).

3. Hence, there is some thing in common which they all share among them and this thing is non-physical, e.g., proposition (e).

This argument is a simple modus ponens. The first premise simply restates the above understanding of sentence tokens (a) through (d) and claims that sentence types are different from sentence tokens. This is uncontroversial because it neither states nor assumes that sentence types are non-physical. The second premise is a conditional and the wording of its consequent is very important. Basically it states that the “sameness of meaning” found among the instances (a) through (d) implies that these instances have the “same thing” in common. This means that, despite appearances, tokens (a) through (d) share a common part. A good analogy would be Siamese twins sharing the same internal organ. This is a crucial point for this argument, because once it is accepted, we can make the following inference. We know from the first premise that tokens (a) through (d) have no common physical part because they are physically distinct. Since a thing or part must be either physical or non-physical, then there is only one alternative: the common part that provides tokens with meaning can only be non-physical. Philosophers typically call these “abstract” objects. Abstract objects which provide meanings to sentence tokens are typically called propositions.

The conclusion of this argument is startling for any kind of materialism or naturalism. The point of this argument is to explain how very distinct items like (a) through (d) have something in common. While natural languages are human constructions and the meanings of words do change over time, it is not a conventional or subjective matter that at a particular time, different sentences mean the same thing. It is an objective matter of fact. To use a slogan, “objective matters of fact require objects!” It is the existence of these abstract objects that permits this objectivity.