

Semantics in a holistic context -- with preliminary convictions and approaches

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ABSTRACT: The study of semantics is related to the study of human behavior. Understanding meaning requires an appreciation of cultural needs and differences. In these, the person is involved in understanding, recognizing, and reacting to personal-social situations and their contents. In this sense, person gets priority above logic, and meaning involves multiple relations to multiple components or complex situations.

Some of the starting points for such a view are best stated as beliefs, or convictions, about human nature, rather than as the result of "proving" them by logical argument. From such starting points, the person wishing to understand human nature can begin some approaches to his/her study.

CONVICTION I: MEANING REQUIRES THAT SOME PERSON BE INVOLVED.

We start with the belief that meaning is not something abstractly "floating in the sky", with no people around. Rather it somehow joins person to thing, person to situation, person to understanding--or failing to understand--some part of the world. There is an "outside" objective world to be observed--but it is known only when it is known, in part, to a person. As the philosopher Kant pointed out ([1985] 1938), years before I had independently stumbled on to that fact, we do not know the thing in itself, but in relation to an observer (with us as observers).

Conviction Ia: The person has (and in part comprises) a "self". One can choose, e.g., to write an article, or to discuss linguistic theory, or to forgive (or condemn) someone who has damaged him. Kearney, an

anthropologist, says (1954:68) that 'The first requirement for a world view is the presence of a *Self*--discernibly distinct from its environment, which I refer to as the *Other*.'

It is the presence of the self in relation to the world which allows us to have a holistic view of that world which includes us. Only a self can discuss such features as we are treating here. A shepherd dog can track a sheep much better than we can. But it does not write a book about it. And for a total holism (not a "fractionated" one), in my view, religion must enter in some way. A "secular" religion may assume that the self is somehow purely physical in its origin and outworking. A theistic view (which I hold) would treat the soul as distinct from body or mind, but integrating both in its decisions and actions. But, under any theory, it seems to me, the mind must somehow be given the power to influence body actions to some degree. Mind and body must both be included in a holistic approach to human behavior.

Conviction Ib: In order to understand an adult, the research scholar must in some sense first understand a child. It is the child, not the adult, who first learns through social interaction in a physical environment how to live in a culture. The Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev told me that the reason for their considering Danish important for them was that a person "learns his moral structure at his mother's knee". It is the child who learns a deep-ingrained understanding of his culture. It is the child who learns his mother tongue as part of that culture.

Conviction Ic: Language is a crucial factor in establishing a cultural identity. The coherence of a community is more likely to involve a shared language than any other feature known to me. A positive contribution of language difference is specifically that it gives coherence to a community. In addition, it can be one of the greatest incentives to resist the tyranny of a single larger community. A negative feature, on the other hand, is that it divides the world community, where it would be nice if we could all understand one another, agree with one another and not fight with one another!

Conviction Id: The early naming of things, events, people, attitudes, situations, or other items is crucial to the ability of a child to be human (not just a "shepherd dog"). A holistic view of human nature must give this characteristic very high priority. Language, involving naming, is like a cultural "telephone exchange", without which a normal human society could not exist. (An animal society has a degree of communication, although it does not go to "graduate school" to study physics.)

The meaning of something, whether it be a name, or an event, or a situation, involves the reaction of a person (or persons, or society) involved, or observing, or thinking about it.

CONVICTION II: A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE CAN FOCUS TEMPORARILY ON STATIC, OR DYNAMIC, OR RELATIONAL COMPONENTS OF A SITUATION.

We start with the belief that a person does not on every occasion look at a thing in the same way. A person can choose to look on a thing as if it were isolated, unchanging, and in a "permanent" form--even when that person knows very well that the item is in fact changing or changeable. The ability to choose to change perspective is part of human nature.

Conviction IIa: A person can choose to focus on an entity as if it were a particle. If the entity is viewed as a particle, it may be seen "as if" it were for the moment "static". In that case, it could be seen as a member of a list, or as a point (somewhat isolated), or in a sequence (in a line or in time). The particle is a structural thing, and comprises a part of the identification of a larger including item which is also seen as a particle, hierarchically. A whole viewed as a whole is seen as a particle. So, also, is a football game; of a "hunch"; or dream. This view (or any other view) of these items is part of their meaning-of-the-moment for the observer.

Conviction IIb: A person can choose to focus on an entity as if it were a wave. The entity so viewed can be thought of as changing, as part of a sequence, or as developing to or from a nucleus, or as dynamic. The wave can be growing, or decaying, as part of a larger process involving the situation. When the child is looked at in relation to its current visible changing characteristics (getting more beautiful, for example), it is being looked at from the wave perspective. So, also, is a baseball game when one is watching its final inning when a player is in the actual, momentary, process of making the winning run. The process feature is part of the significance, and hence of the semantic impact, on the observer.

Conviction IIc: A person can choose to focus on an entity as if it were primarily a point in a larger pattern or system, i.d., as a part of--or as comprising--a field. The entity so viewed can be thought of as existing in relation to the larger pattern, rather than being felt as somehow "existing autonomously" in thought or "isolatable objective reality". The field can be organized multi-dimensionally, with its parts in intersecting relations one to another simultaneously in the still-larger organized field context. The shape of the baseball diamond is not only called the "field" but is itself, semantically here, a field structure. So, also, is the planned (by the coach) constituency of the team as a whole. Holism, in linguistic semantics, requires whole elements of systems of behavior, as well as of background, and of the containing of larger systems.

Conviction IId: Units, as observed by a person, include entities of various types, e.g., things, actions, attributes. Each can be perceived as a particle, or a wave, or a field (or a point in a field). Things are objectively (or imaginatively) seen as physical chunks, which can in general be touched or stared at (or thought about as if they could be touched if one were close enough to do so). Actions are movements of things, in which the process of change can be observed. Attributes are characteristics of things such that the observer can mentally abstract those components, and