

John L. Austin

Performing speech

Wittgenstein spawned two major lines of thought: an analytical strand exploring the truth of utterances and a discourse pragmatic strand analysing communicative acts and processes. J. L. Austin (1911–1960), who initiated speech-act theory (1962), is a representative of the latter. Examples such as 'I declare you husband and wife' or 'I promise you to give the book back to you' testify to the fact that utterances are not only produced to describe a certain state of the world but also to perform certain actions such as weddings and promises. In the section below, the theoretical ramifications of this insight are spelt out with respect to the 'meaning of a word'. Austin reveals that words are not like the names given to a referent. Instead, it is a fundamental characteristic of words to have different meanings according to the context in which they are used. This emphasis on the practical dimension of meaning production reminds us of the crucial distinction between texts and discourses: texts (or words) are abstract entities which have no meaning outside of discourse. Austin's speech-act theory has inspired a variety of theoretical strands in pragmatics (Searle 1992) and poststructuralism (Butler 1997).

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The Discourse Studies Reader

Main currents in theory and analysis

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001503599

John Benjamins Publishing Company

John L. Austin. 1979[1961]. 'The Meaning of a Word'.
In *Philosophical Papers*, 3rd edition, 55–75, selected 56–62, 72–75.
Oxford: Oxford University Press.

I begin with some remarks about 'the meaning of a word'. I think many persons now see all a part of what I shall say: but not all do, and there is the tendency to forget it, or to get it slightly wrong. Insofar as I am merely flogging the converted, I apologize to them.

A preliminary remark. It may justly be urged that, properly speaking, what alone has meaning is a *sentence*. Of course, we can speak quite properly of, for example, 'looking up the meaning of a word' in a dictionary. Nevertheless, it appears that the sense in which a word or a phrase 'has a meaning' is derivative from the sense in which a sentence 'has a meaning': to say a word or a phrase 'has a meaning' is to say that there are sentences in which it occurs which 'have meanings': and to know the meaning which the word or phrase has, is to know the meanings of the sentences in which it occurs. All the dictionary can do when we 'look up the meaning of a word' is to suggest aids to understanding of sentences in which it occurs. Hence it appears correct to say that what 'has meaning' in the primary sense is the sentence. And older philosophers who discussed the problem of 'the meaning of words' tend to fall into *special* errors, avoided by more recent philosophers, who discuss rather the parallel problem of 'the meaning of sentences'. Nevertheless, if we are on our guard, we perhaps need to fall into these special errors, and I propose to overlook them at present.

There are many sorts of sentence in which the words 'the meaning of the word so-and-so' are found, e.g. 'He does not know, or understand, the meaning of the word *handsaw*': 'I shall have to explain to her the meaning of the word *pikestaff*': and so on. I intend to consider primarily the common question, 'What is the meaning of so-and-so?' or 'What is the meaning of the word so-and-so?'

Suppose that in ordinary life I am asked: 'What is the meaning of the word *racy*?' There are two sorts of thing I may do in response: I may reply in *words*, trying to describe what raciness is and what it is not, to give examples of sentences in which one might use the word *racy*, and of others in which one should not. Let us call the *sort* of thing 'explaining the syntactics' of the word 'racy' in the English language. On the other hand, I might do what we may call 'demonstrating the semantics' of the word, by getting the questioner to *imagine*, or even actually to *experience*, situations which we should describe correctly by means of sentences containing the words 'racy' 'raciness', etc., and again in other situations where we should *not* use these words. This is, of course, a simple case: but perhaps the same two *sorts* of procedure would be gone through in the case of at least most ordinary words. And in the same way, if I wished to find out 'whether he understands the meaning of the word *racy*', I should test him at some length in these two ways (which perhaps could not be entirely divorced from each other).

Having asked in this way, and answered, 'What is the meaning of (the word) 'rat'?', 'What is the meaning of (the word) 'cat'?', 'What is the meaning of (the word) 'mat'?', and so on, we then try, being philosophers, to ask the further *general* question. We do not intend to mean by it a certain question which would be perfectly all right, namely, 'What is the meaning of (the word) 'word'?', *that* would be no more general than is asking the meaning of the word 'rat', and would be answered in a precisely similar way.

No: we want to ask rather, 'What is the meaning of a-word-in-general?' or 'of *any* word' – not meaning 'any' word you like to choose, but rather *no particular word at all*, just 'any word'. Now if we pause even for a moment to reflect, this is a perfectly absurd question to be trying to ask. I can only answer a question of the form 'What is the meaning of 'x'?' if 'x' is some *particular* word you are asking about. This supposed *general* question is really just a spurious question of a type which commonly arises in philosophy. We may call it the fallacy of asking about 'Nothing-in-particular' which is a practice decried by the plain man, but [which] the philosopher called 'generalizing' and regarded with some complacency. Many other examples of the fallacy can be found: take, for example, the case of 'reality' – we try to pass from such questions as 'How would you distinguish a real rat from an imaginary rat?' to 'What is a real thing?', a question which merely gives rise to nonsense.

We may expose the error in our present case thus. Instead of asking 'What is the meaning of (the word) 'rat'?' we might clearly have asked 'What is a 'rat'?' and so on. But if our questions have been put in *that* form, it becomes very difficult to formulate any *general* question which could impose on us for a moment. Perhaps 'What is anything??' Few philosophers, if perhaps not none, have been foolhardy enough to pose such a question. In the same way, we should not perhaps be tempted to generalize such a question as 'Does he know the meaning of (the word) 'rat'?' 'Does he know the meaning of a word?' would be silly.

Faced with the nonsense question 'What is the meaning of a word?', and perhaps dimly recognizing it to be nonsense, we are nevertheless not inclined to give it up. Instead, we transform it in a curious and noteworthy manner. Up to now, we had been asking 'What-is-the-meaning-of (the word) 'rat'?', etc.; and ultimately 'What-is-the-meaning-of a word?' But now, being baffled, we change so to speak, the hyphenation, and ask 'What is the-meaning-of-a-word?' or sometimes, 'What is the 'meaning' of a word?': I shall refer, for brevity's sake, only to the other. It is easy to see how very different this question is from the other. At once a crowd of traditional and reassuring answers present themselves: 'a concept', 'an idea', 'an image', 'a class of similar sense', etc. All of which are equally spurious answers to a pseudo-question. Plunging ahead, however, or rather retracing our steps, we now proceed to ask such questions as 'What is the-meaning-of-the-(the-word) 'rat'?' which is as spurious as 'what-is-the-meaning-of (the word) 'rat'?' was genuine. And again we answer 'the idea of a rat' and so forth.

How quaint this procedure is, may be seen in the following way. Supposing a plain man puzzled, were to ask me 'What is the meaning of (the word) 'muggy'?', and I were to answer, 'The idea or concept of 'mugginess' or 'The class of sense of which it is correct to say "This is muggy": the man would stare at me as at an imbecile. And this is sufficiently unusual for me to conclude that that was not at all the sort of answer he expected: nor, in plain English, *can* that question *ever* require that sort of answer. (...)

All this must seem very obvious, but I wish to point out that it is fatally easy to forget it: no doubt I shall do so myself many times in the course of this paper. Even those who see pretty clearly that 'concepts', 'abstract ideas', and so on are fictitious entities, which we owe in part to asking questions about 'the meaning of a word', nevertheless themselves think that there *is something* which is 'the meaning of a word'. Thus Mr. Hampshire attacks to some purpose the theory that there is such a thing as 'the meaning of a word': what *he* thinks is wrong is the belief that there is a *single* thing called *the* meaning: 'concepts' are nonsense, and no single particular 'image' can be *the* meaning of a general word. So, he goes on to say, the meaning of a word must really be 'a *class* of similar particular ideas'. 'If we are asked 'What does this mean?' we point to a class of particular ideas.' But a 'class of particular ideas' is every bit as fictitious an entity as a 'concept' or 'abstract idea'. In the same way Mr. C. W. Morris (in the *Encyclopaedia of Unified Science*) attacks, to some purpose, those who think of 'a meaning' as a definite something which is 'simply located' somewhere: what *he* thinks is wrong is that people think of 'a meaning' as a kind of entity which can be described wholly without reference to the total activity of 'semiosis'. Well and good. Yet he himself makes some of the crudest possible remarks about 'the designatum' of a word: every sign has a designatum, which is not a particular thing but a *kind* of object or *class* of object. Now this is quite as fictitious an entity as any 'Platonic idea': and is due to precisely the same fallacy of looking for 'the meaning (or designatum) of a word'.

Why are we tempted to slip back in this way? Perhaps there are two main reasons. First, there are the curious beliefs that all words are names, i.e. in effect *proper* names, and therefore stand for something or designate it in the way that a proper name does. But this view that general names 'have denotation' in the same way that proper names do, is quite as odd as the view that proper names 'have connotation' in the same way that general names do, which is commonly recognized to lead to error. Secondly, we are afflicted by a more common malady, which is this. When we have given an analysis of a certain sentence, containing a word or a phrase 'x', we often feel inclined to ask, of our analysis, 'What in it, is 'x'?' For example, we give an analysis of 'The State owns this land', in sentences about individual men, their relations and transactions: and then at last we feel inclined to ask: well now, *what*, in all that, *is* the State? And we might answer: the State *is* a collection of individual men united in a certain manner. Or again, when we have analysed the statement 'trees can exist unperceived': hence

theories about 'sensibilia' and what not. So in our present case, having given all that is required, viz. an account of 'What-is-the-meaning-of "What-is-the-meaning-of (the word) 'x'?"' we *still* feel tempted, wrongly supposing our original sentence to contain a constituent 'the-meaning-of (the-word)-'x"', to ask 'Well now, as it turns out, what *is* the meaning of the word 'x', after all?' And we answer, 'a class of similar particular ideas' and what not.

Of course, all my account of our motives in this matter may be only a convenient didactic schema: I do not think it is – but I recognize that one should not impute motives, least of all rational motives. Anyhow, what I claim is clear, is that there is *no* simple and handy appendage of a word called 'the meaning of (the word) 'x'. (...)

6. Another case which often provides puzzles, is that of words like 'youth' and 'love': which sometimes mean the object loved, or the thing which is youthful, sometimes the passion 'love' or the quality 'youth'. These cases are of course easy (rather *like* 'healthy'). But suppose we take the noun 'truth': here is a case where the disagreements between different theorists have largely turned on whether they interpreted this as a name of a substance, of a quality, or of a relation.

7. Lastly, I want to take a specially interesting sort of case, which is perhaps commoner and at the bottom of more muddles than we are aware of. Take the sense in which I talk of cricket bat and cricket ball and cricket umpire. The reason that all are called by the same name is perhaps that each has its part – its *own special* part – to play in the activity called cricketing: it is no good to say that cricket *simply* means 'used in cricket': for we cannot explain what we mean by 'cricket' *except* by explaining the special parts played in cricketing by the bat, ball, etc. Aristotle's suggestion was that the word 'good' might be used in such a way: in which case it is obvious how far astray we should go if we look for a 'definition' of the word 'good' in any ordinary simple sense: or look for the way in which 'good' things are 'similar' to each other, in any ordinary sense. If we tried to find out by such methods what 'cricket' meant, we should very likely conclude that it too was a simple unanalyzable supersensible quality.

Another thing that becomes plain from such examples is that the apparently common-sense distinction between 'What is the meaning of the word x' and 'What particular things *are* x and to what degrees?' is not of universal application by any means. The question cannot be distinguished in such cases. Or a similar case would be some word like 'golfing': it is not sense to ask 'What is the meaning of golfing?' 'What things are golfing?' Though it *is* sense to ask what component activities go to constitute golfing, what implements are used in golfing ('golf' clubs, etc.) and in what ways. Aristotle suggests 'happiness' is a word of this kind: in which case it is evident how far astray we shall go if we treat it as though it were a word like 'whiteness'.

These summarily treated examples are enough to show how essential it is to have a thorough knowledge of the different reasons for which we call different things by the same name, before we can embark confidently on an inquiry. If we rush up with a demand for a definition in the simple manner of Plato or many other philosophers, if we use the rigid dichotomy 'same meaning, different meaning' or 'What x means,' as distinguished from 'the things which are x,' we shall simply make hashes of things. Perhaps some people are now discussing such questions seriously. All that is to be found in traditional logics is the mention that there are, besides univocal and equivocal words, 'also analogous words': which, without further explanation, is used to lump together all cases where a word has not always absolutely the same meaning, nor several absolutely different meanings. All that 'similarity' theorists manage is to say that all things called by some one name are similar to some one pattern, or are all more similar to each other than any of them is to anything else; which is *obviously* untrue. Anyone who wishes to see the complexity of the problem, has only got to look in a (good) dictionary under such a word as 'head': the different meanings of the word 'head' will be related to each other in all sorts of different ways at once.

To summarize the contentions of this paper then. Firstly, the phrase 'the meaning of a word' is a spurious phrase. Secondly and consequently, a re-examination is needed of phrases like the two which I discuss, 'being a part of the meaning of' and 'having the same meaning.' On these matters, dogmatists require prodding: although history indeed suggests that it may sometimes be better to let sleeping dogmatists lie.