

Some meaning of “(linguistic) meaning”: semantic networks as Peircean signs

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1. Theories of “meaning” or theories of “meaning”s?

This paper is meant to be a voice in the debate on the meaning of “meaning” [Putnam 1975]. Zlatev (2002) notices a multiplicity of meaning theories; in my opinion the problem lies not in the multitude of theories, but in the proliferation of different meanings of “meaning”. The key question we have to answer, trying to make “meaning” unambiguous, concerns the ontological status of meaning. Any realist semantics is too narrow: it excludes lots of “objects” whose ontological status is less clear [Jackendoff 2002, p.300-303]; “ecological” theories of meaning don’t answer the above question satisfactorily. I will argue, that we should start explaining meaning of “meaning” in a kind of conceptualist framework, simultaneously eliminating from the theory of meaning such terms as *representation* and *intentionality*.

2. Explanation through implementation

Meaning of “meaning” can be explained on a computational model. As Zlatev remarks: *artificial meaning systems could only be viewed as models of meaning systems* [Zlatev 2002, p.284], so these systems can be treated as **theories** of meaning. In this paper I will present an instance of such a model: an artificial agent of the SNePS system [Shapiro, Rapaport 1987], consisting of the propositional semantic network as the formalism for representing knowledge. Meaning of any concept – in this view – is the role of this concept in the entire network of agent’s beliefs. Accordingly, the meaning of any node in a semantic network is its place in that network. In this account it is possible to eliminate the concept of representation from the theory: nodes (concepts) don’t represent meanings, they **are** meanings.

3. Semantic networks as signs

I suggest an interpretation of the above implementation as an instance of Peircean theory of signs. An expression of language can be interpreted as a *representamen* (Firstness); This expression relates to an object (of thought) (*signifie*, Secondness) – interpreted as a node in semantic network. Meaning – an interpretation of the expression (Thirdness) is (some part of) the rest of the network. The scope of a part of the network is Peircean “respect or capacity” the *representamen* stands to somebody or something in. I will show that such features of a sign as: synechism of a sign, fallibilism and holism are also features of a semantic network.

References

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