

Common Sense in Semantics

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Q: What is the principal difference between your conception of semantics and other conceptions?

A: On my conception of the subject, semantics is the study of meaning. This may seem an odd characterization—like a historian saying that history is a study of the past. But the conception of semantics as the study of meaning is far from an uninformative truism. In fact, the conception expresses a quite controversial view of semantics which is, moreover, unique among approaches to the subject in the philosophy of language, linguistics, and logic, in taking senses or meanings, *as they present themselves in our ordinary linguistic experience*, to be the proper objects of study in semantics. Other approaches are reductionistic. They seek to reduce the ordinary notions of sense and meaning away, replacing them with something else regarded from the metaphysical perspective of the reductionist as philosophically more respectable or scientifically more tractable. Ever since Russell's attempt to treat meaning as reference, we have had one attempt after another to treat meaning as something else. There have been attempts to reduce it to behavior-controlling stimuli, to images, methods of verification, stereotypes, truth conditions, extensions in possible worlds, use, illocutionary act potential, perlocutionary potential of various sorts, and even physical inscriptions. Indeed, the history of philosophical semantics in this century might well be written as a succession of metaphysically inspired attempts to eliminate the ordinary notion of meaning or sense.

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