

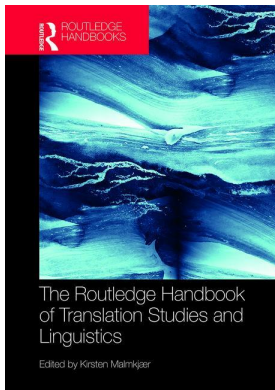
This article was downloaded by: 10.2.97.136

On: 31 May 2023

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



## The Routledge Handbook of Translation Studies and Linguistics

Kirsten Malmkjær

### Semantics and translation

Publication details

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315692845-3>

Kirsten Malmkjær

**Published online on: 18 Dec 2017**

**How to cite :-** Kirsten Malmkjær. 18 Dec 2017, *Semantics and translation from*: The Routledge Handbook of Translation Studies and Linguistics Routledge

Accessed on: 31 May 2023

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315692845-3>

**PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT**

Full terms and conditions of use: <https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms>

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

# Semantics and translation

Kirsten Malmkjær

---

## Introduction and definitions

Semantics is the study of meaning and to the extent that translation concerns the conveyance of a message in one language that “means the same” as a message previously conveyed in another language, meaning is a central concept in translation theory. Furthermore, as we shall see, translation is a central concept in theories of meaning. But meaning is not an easy concept to define or to theorise and at least one philosopher has been driven to wonder “Why is the theory of meaning so *hard*?” (Putnam 1970/1975, 139). Scholars in Translation Studies may feel that this is not their problem: they do not need to explain what meaning is; they only need to be able to discuss the relationships between texts that interest them. But almost any discussion of such relationships takes for granted some sort of *tertium comparationis*, something that the two texts do or do not have in common, and this is often referred to as their meaning (not forgetting that other concepts, such as a text function, serve as the *tertium comparationis* in some theories of translation; see Nord 1997).

Much confusion can be engendered by listing scholars’ varied ways of categorising kinds of meaning. However, at least one broad distinction must be drawn between what I shall call *basic* meaning and *connotational* meaning. Basic meaning includes Lyons’ (1977, 50) descriptive, social and expressive meaning, Halliday’s (1970, 143) ideational/experiential, interpersonal and textual meaning, and what is known variously as referential, cognitive, propositional, designative, literal, representational (Bühler 1934), thin (Strawson 1950/1972) and denotative meaning. It is the kind of meaning about which some agreement can be reached through discussion, because it has an air of objectivity about it. Connotational meaning, in contrast, has to do with the associations a person has with parts of their language(s). This is less open to discussion and it is not the topic of this chapter. In order to become clearer about the focus here, let us look at ways in which the terms “mean”, “means”, “meant” and “meaning” are used in English. Lyons (1977, 1–2) and Palmer (1981, 3) between them offer the following examples:

1. I did not mean to hurt you.
2. He means well, but he’s rather clumsy.

3. Life without love has no meaning.
4. Fame and riches mean nothing to the true scholar.
5. Dark clouds mean rain.
6. A red light means “stop”.
7. Calligraphy means “beautiful handwriting”.
8. What do you mean by the word “concept”.
9. It was John I meant not Harry.
10. He never says what he means.
11. She rarely means what she says.

In (1) and (2), what is at issue is what a person intends as the outcome of their actions. But an intended outcome, or purpose, of an action cannot be identified with its meaning. Many utterances might have similar outcomes; it is possible to hurt someone in several ways, both by saying and doing, and we do not want an account of meaning that makes all hurtful linguistic (and non-linguistic) actions synonymous. In (3), we are dealing with the purpose of life, and in (4) with the importance someone attaches to something. Here, again, we are not dealing with linguistic meaning, but with aspects of the psychology of persons, or with the emotions. It is in (5) that we begin to approximate towards the meaning of meaning we are interested in, because in (5) there is at least a proper relationship of what we might call signification between clouds and rain (see Chapter 3 on semiotics and translation in this volume). To an experienced observer, the presence of dark clouds will signify the likelihood of rain in the near future. But the clouds are natural signs, and the signifying relationship between them and the rain is a relationship of what Grice (1957) has referred to as natural meaning, as opposed to non-natural meaning. It is non-natural meaning which interests us as semanticists.

A major difference between natural and non-natural meaning is that we cannot ascribe to the clouds the intention to warn or tell us that it will rain, whereas we can assume that someone uttering the words “It is going to rain” intends to warn or tell us that it is going to rain. Another way of demonstrating the difference is to point out that it would not make sense to say of the clouds that they mean “rain”. In contrast, it makes perfect sense to say of the example in (6) that the red light means “stop”. In the case of non-natural meaning, there exists a convention according to which we accept that certain signs have certain meanings which could typically also have been conveyed by means of a linguistic expression. The red light stands in for the word “stop”; the clouds do not stand in for the word “rain”.

However, neither example (6) nor example (7) fully covers the phenomenon that interests us as semanticists, as we can see by contemplating the nature and functions of definitions in dictionaries. The definition of “calligraphy” in (7) can only help a person who already knows what “beautiful handwriting” means. If you do not have a point of entry into a dictionary then the dictionary cannot help you. To find the meaning of, say, the German word “gelb”, you would, if you did not know enough German to use a monolingual dictionary, go to a dictionary which links German to your mother tongue. If you were English, for example, you would not go to a German/Danish dictionary, because that would just tell you that “gelb” means “gul” which would not help you.

In examples (8) and (9), we begin to get close to the sense of “meaning” that we are interested in. What is at issue here is what entity in the world someone is referring to with a given expression. The concept in (8) and the person in (9) are non-linguistic entities which are *referents* for the expressions; they are what the expressions denote. In addition to the relationships which expressions form with other expressions in a language, expressions also

relate to the non-linguistic world, and it is not possible to provide a coherent, non-circular theory of meaning without taking this relationship into account.

In examples (10) and (11) a contrast is set up between what Searle (1979, 93) refers to as “speaker’s utterance meaning” and “word or sentence meaning”. We shall return to this distinction, but notice that for it to be possible to be aware that someone has said one thing (conveyed by the sentence meaning) and apparently meant another (the speaker’s utterance meaning), one must have a reasonable idea about what the sentence meaning was.

An excursion into the history of attempts to define meaning will take us some way towards understanding the difficulties involved in giving an account of meaning. Such an account has to provide answers to two main questions, which Davidson (1973/1984, 125) formulates within the following scenario (my addition of numbers in square brackets):

Kurt utters the words ‘Es regnet’ and under the right conditions we know that he has said that it is raining. Having identified his utterance as intentional and linguistic, we are able to go on to interpret his words: we can say what his words, on that occasion, meant. [1] What could we know that would enable us to do this? [2] How could we come to know it? The first of these questions is not the same as the question what we *do* know that enables us to interpret the words of others. For there may easily be something we could know and don’t, knowledge of which would suffice for interpretation, while on the other hand it is not altogether obvious that there is anything we actually know which plays an essential role in interpretation. The second question, how we could come to have knowledge that would serve to yield interpretations, does not, of course, concern the actual history of language acquisition. It is thus a doubly hypothetical question: given a theory that would make interpretation possible, what evidence plausibly available to a potential interpreter would support the theory to a reasonable degree?

In the following section, we shall explore some attempts at providing answers to these two questions.

## Historical perspectives

### *First attempt: The ideational theory of meaning*

A common-sense view of meaning is that ideas in the mind are the meanings of expressions. Grayling (1982, 186) calls this the ideational theory of meaning. In Britain, Locke is the most famous proponent of this theory in its purest form. Locke (1689/1964, Book Three, Chapter II) writes:

*Words are sensible signs, necessary for communication.* Man, though he have great variety of thought, and such from which others as well as himself might receive profit and delight; yet they are all within his own breast, invisible and hidden from others, nor can of themselves be made to appear. The comfort and advantage of society not being to be had without communication of thoughts, it was necessary that man should find some external signs, whereof those invisible ideas, which his thoughts are made up of, might be known to others. For this purpose nothing was so fit, either for plenty or quickness, as those articulate sounds, which with so much ease and variety he found himself able to make. Thus we may conceive how *words*, which were by nature so well adapted to that purpose, came to be made use of by men as the signs of their ideas; not by any natural

connexion that there is between particular sounds and certain ideas, for then there would be but one language amongst all men; but by a voluntary imposition, whereby such a word is made arbitrarily the mark of such an idea. The use, then, of words, is to be sensible marks of ideas; and the ideas they stand for are their proper and immediate signification.

As Grayling (1982, 186) points out, there are a number of problems with this theory, among them the assumption that thought precedes speech both logically and historically: our ancestors found themselves enjoying a rich thought-life which they decided that they would share with each other, so they began to experiment with verbal sounds. But this is an unlikely scenario; it is far more likely that the richness of human language grew in tandem with the richness of human thought; indeed, it is hard to see how anything but rudimentary thought could be possible without language.

Another question that faces the ideational theory of meaning concerns how the language would have developed. Imagine that your ancestor wanted to make a link between his or her idea of a cave and the word “cave”. How could s/he check, the next time s/he wanted to mention the cave, that s/he had remembered the right word for it? This is the crux of Wittgenstein’s (1958) anti-private-language argument. If you were trying to use such a language, then:

there would be no difference between your being under the correct impression that you were following a rule and your being under the incorrect impression that you were following a rule, or, at least, there would be no detectable difference even for you. So there would be no effective rules in this so-called ‘language’. Anything you said would do.  
(Pears 1971, 159)

But the severest difficulty is that even if you should happen to get it right for yourself, you could not know whether other language users were using the language in the same way as you. I can refer to my idea with the word “cave”, but I cannot know that the word conjures up the same kind of idea in your mind. Nor is it clear how an idea-language could be taught, because ideas, private as they are, cannot serve as teaching links. I cannot present a learner with my idea of a cave and say: “Look, this is what I mean by ‘cave’”.

So the ideational theory of meaning cannot answer both questions raised by Davidson: ideas are not evidence that could be plausibly available to someone trying to understand what another person means.

### *Second attempt: Augustine’s theory of reference*

Augustine writes in *Confessions*, I.8 (between 397 and 400 CE) (see Wittgenstein 1958, paragraph 1, note 1):

When they (my elders) named some object . . . I saw this and I grasped that the thing was called by the sound they uttered . . . Thus, as I heard words repeatedly used in their proper place in various sentences, I gradually learned to understand what objects they signified.

This theory considers aspects of the world to provide evidence of meaning. Many of these are, at least, visible; if I say “cave”, pointing to my cave, then you might get the idea that I

mean by “cave”, cave. However, as Wittgenstein (1958, §28 and *passim*) points out, ostension is not that simple: if I point to my cave and say “cave”, my interlocutor might take me to mean “cave”; however, they might just as well take me to be referring to the darkness in the cave, or to its shape, or to the number 1, as there is just one cave, and so on. As Wittgenstein puts it “ostensive definition can be variously interpreted in *every* case”. Furthermore, even if I refer with “cave” to my cave, my cave is not the meaning of “cave”. As Strawson (1950/1972, 40) has pointed out, this would have the absurd consequence that if I take my pencil out of my pocket I am taking the meaning of the term “pencil” out of my pocket. And even if we were to extend the theory so that “pencil” came to refer to all the pencils there are, have been and will be, this would not help because it would commit us to the absurd idea that every person uttering the term would be referring to this infinite number of pencils, something that is both conceptually and logically impossible.

Furthermore, several words or phrases can refer to the same thing without meaning the same, as in the case of “the morning star” and “the evening star”. If the meaning of expressions were just the referent, then these expressions should mean the same; but it is possible for one and the same person to believe at one and the same time “the morning star is in the sky” and “it is not the case that the evening star is in the sky”. A closely related mystery for the theory is the possibility that a true identity statement can convey new information. For example, the utterance “The morning star is the evening star” may be news to someone. Clearly, if the planet Venus, the object, were the sole component of the meaning of each expression, then anyone who understood the meaning of them both would already have known that both referred to Venus, and, consequently, that they referred to the same.

Finally, even though some expressions do not refer, we would not want to say that they are meaningless. Consider, “The present king of France is bald”. This whole utterance, and even the part of it that does not refer, has meaning, so its meaning obviously cannot be its referent.

These problems were addressed by the German philosopher and logician, Gottlob Frege.

### *Third attempt: Frege’s theory of sense and reference*

Frege (1892/1977, 57) suggests that in addition to “that to which the sign refers, which may be called the reference of the sign” there is also “the *sense* of the sign, wherein the mode of presentation is contained”. Then “The reference of ‘evening star’ would be the same as that of ‘morning star,’ but not the sense”.

A name or definite description “*expresses* its sense, *stands for* or *designates* its reference” (1892/1977, 61). The sense, or mode of presentation, is made publicly available by the expression; it is shared by everyone who knows the language and it must not be confused with a subjective idea, or with connotations (1892/1977, 59) or with the specific form of the expression because Frege also believes that different expressions, whether in the same or different languages, can convey the same sense (1892/1977, 58). This is a conundrum for stylistics, where there tends to be an assumption that the way in which something is expressed matters to meaning, but it seems tempting for translation scholars until, that is, they read that Frege (1918–1919) wants to say that, e.g. “steed” has the same sense as “cart horse”, at which point the Translation Studies scholar will probably join forces with the stylistician and reject sense as helpful, at least to his or her practical endeavours. It could be maintained, however, in this connection, that translators and, in particular interpreters, for whom thinking on their feet and time constraints loom large, might on

occasion find themselves forced, through lack of terminology or mental agility, to forgo precision of differentiation of the type between “steed” and “cart horse” and opt for the neutral term, “horse”. Arguably, this is a strategy that succeeds in conveying a sense of the original.

To every expression, according to Frege, there corresponds a sense, whereas there are plenty of expressions which do not refer. So “in grasping a sense, one is not certainly assured of a reference” (1892/1977, 58). In the case of “the present king of France”, we grasp its sense even though it has no reference. The meaning, in this case, is exhausted by the sense, and the sense rescues the expression from the meaninglessness to which the primitive reference theory would condemn it. In the case of whole sentences, their sense is the thought they express. But, as Frege (1892/1977, 63) points out, we are often not satisfied simply to know the thought that a sentence or utterance expresses; we generally want to know, also, whether the sentence expresses a truth, and:

We are therefore driven into accepting the *truth value* of a sentence as constituting its reference. By the truth value of a sentence I understand the circumstance that it is true or false. There are no further truth values. For brevity I call the one the True and the other the False.

The True and the False are objects, just like Venus is an object, and a sentence is a proper name for one of these objects just like “Venus” or “the morning star” are names for the object Venus. Given that the reference of a sentence is its truth value, all true sentences have the same reference and so do all false sentences. This may seem peculiar, but it allows us to understand how sense and reference together contribute to the meaning of a sentence (1892/1977, 65):

We can never be concerned only with the reference of a sentence; but again the mere thought alone yields no knowledge, but only the thought together with its reference, i.e. its truth value. Judgements can be regarded as advances from a thought to a truth value.

However, the theory allows for some sentences not to have truth values, namely those whose parts fail to refer, and this disturbed logicians like Russell (1905), according to whom any sentence containing a definite description asserts existence. To assert the existence of the non-existent is to say something false; ergo, sentences containing reference-lacking definite descriptions are false.

Faced with these and related difficulties, attempts were made to build on Frege’s theory in such a way that its weaknesses would be eradicated and its strengths retained. For example, according to the verification theory of meaning, a consistent and satisfactory theory of meaning can be provided for a set of sentences that are, in Ayer’s terms “factually significant” (Ayer 1936/1971, 48):

a sentence is factually significant to any given person, if, and only if, he knows how to verify the proposition which it purports to express – that is, if he knows what observations would lead him, under certain conditions, to accept the proposition as being true, or reject it as being false.

However, this so-called verification principle proved too restrictive. The general laws of science are not verifiable, because they are universally quantified. The statements of history

fare no better, for how can present observation verify statements about the past? Nor is it clear how the verification principle itself should be verified, and if it cannot be verified, then it is not factually significant. For a time, it was thought that the verification principle might be saved by Schlick's verification theory of meaning (1936), according to which the meaning of a proposition is its method of verification:

Stating the meaning of a sentence amounts to stating the rules according to which the sentence is to be used, and this is the same as stating the way in which it can be verified (or falsified).

(Schlick 1936; see Grayling 1982, 205)

This theory considers meaning to be a method, rather than something that sentences "have" or do not have, which might be an advantage; and if it were true, then so would Ayer's principle be. Schlick believed that there were certain "protocol sentences" which consisted in incorrigible reports of observation and which required no other kind of verification. These constituted "the unshakable points of contact between knowledge and reality", and all other factually significant sentences were derivable from these. Objections to this proposal include Quine's (1960) that it is not possible to verify or falsify individual sentences in isolation, because our theory of nature is holistic, so that all observation is theory laden, a notion that will be discussed below along with "Quine's pessimism" (with thanks to Putnam 1970/1975, 146–149) regarding a theory of translation. But first, let us consider a theory of language which has captured the imagination of at least some Translation Studies scholars, namely that pioneered by J. L. Austin.

#### *Fourth attempt: Speech-act theory* (this section draws on Malmkjær 1995/2002/2010/2013)

Speech-act theory was developed by Austin in the 1930s and published in 1962 on the basis of a series of lectures that Austin gave at Harvard University in 1955. The theory arises in reaction to what Austin (1962, 3) calls the descriptive fallacy, the view that a declarative sentence is always used to describe some state of affairs truly or falsely. Austin points out that there are many declarative sentences which do not describe, report or state anything, and of which it makes no sense to ask whether they are true or false. The utterance of such sentences is, or is part of, an action that would not normally be described as simply saying something. Austin (1962, 5) gives a number of examples: "I do", as uttered as part of a marriage ceremony; "I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth", as uttered by the appropriate person while smashing a bottle against the stem of the ship in question; "I give and bequeath my watch to my brother", as written in a will; or "I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow". To utter such sentences in the appropriate circumstances is not to describe what you are doing: it *is* doing it, or part of doing it, and Austin calls such utterances performatives or performative utterances, distinguishing them from constatives or constative utterances, which are used to state a fact or describe a state of affairs. Only constatives can be true or false; performatives are happy or unhappy.

The criterion for a happy performative is that the circumstances in which it is uttered should be appropriate: certain felicity conditions must obtain. If a performative is unhappy, or infelicitous, something has gone wrong in the connection between the utterance and the circumstances in which it is uttered.



There are four main types of condition for the happy functioning of a performative (Austin 1962, 14–15):

1. It must be a commonly accepted convention that the uttering of particular words by particular people in particular circumstances will produce a particular effect.
2. All participants in this conventional procedure must carry out the procedure correctly and completely.
3. If the convention is that the participants in the procedure must have certain thoughts, feelings and intentions, then the participants must in fact have those thoughts, feelings and intentions.
4. If the convention is that any participant in the procedure binds her/himself to behave subsequently in a certain way, then s/he must in fact behave subsequently in that way.

If any of these criteria is unfulfilled, the performative will be unhappy in one of two ways. If we sin against either (1) or (2), the conventional act is *not* achieved: a person who is already married may go through another marriage ceremony, but this second marriage will be null and void because its circumstances were faulty (1). Or, a couple may go through all of the marriage ceremony except signing the register; the marriage will then be null and void because the ceremony was not carried out completely (2). Cases in which the act is *not* achieved are called misfires.

If we sin against (3) and (4), the conventional act *is* achieved, but the procedure will have been abused. A person may say “I congratulate you” without having the appropriate feelings of joy for the addressee; or s/he may say “I promise to be there” without having any intention of being there. In such cases, the act will be insincere (3). Or, a person may say “I welcome you” and then proceed to treat the addressee as an unwelcome intruder, in which case s/he will have breached the commitment inherent in the greeting subsequently to behave in a certain manner (4).

So the connection between performatives and constatives is that for a performance to be happy, certain constatives must be true (1962, 45): for “I congratulate you” to be happy, “I feel pleased for you” must be true.

However, Austin points out that the distinction between the truth/falsity dimension and the happiness/unhappiness dimension is not as clear as it first seemed to be. First, it seems that not only performatives can be unhappy: “All John’s children are bald” uttered when John has no children is just as unhappy as “I give and bequeath my watch to my brother” written in the will of a person who has no watch. In each case, certain things are presupposed by the utterance: that John has children, and that the will writer owns a watch. These presuppositions fail for lack of reference. Similarly, “The cat is on the mat” uttered by somebody who does not believe that the cat is on the mat is just as much abused as “I promise to be there” uttered by someone who has no intention of being there. Both are unhappy because their implications are unfulfilled: the utterance of “The cat is on the mat” implies that the speaker believes that the cat is on the mat just as “I promise to be there” implies that the speaker intends to be there. So constatives can be as unhappy as performatives, and the unhappinesses arise for the same types of reason in the case of both types of utterance. Furthermore, performatives seem to be able to be untrue just as constatives. “I advise you to do it” could be considered false in the sense of conflicting with the facts if my belief about what is best for you is mistaken. Similarly, “I declare you guilty” conflicts with the facts if you are innocent. So, in general (Austin 1962, 52):

In order to explain what can go wrong with statements we cannot just concentrate on the proposition involved . . . as has been done traditionally. We must consider the total

situation in which the utterance is issued – the total speech-act – if we are to see the parallel between statements and performative utterances, and how each can go wrong. So the total speech-act in the total speech-situation is emerging from logic piecemeal as important in special cases: and thus we are assimilating the supposed constative utterance to the performative.

Furthermore, although some performatives are marked as such by containing a verb that stands for the action being performed, as when in saying “I promise”, I am promising, many performatives do not contain these so-called speech-act verbs or performative verbs, and are not even declarative sentences; in many cases, uttering words such as “dog”, “bull” or “fire” constitutes an action of warning just as much as uttering “I warn you that there is a dog/bull/fire”, and we would want to say that these utterances, too, are performatives. A distinction is therefore drawn between explicit performatives and implicit or primary performatives. Any primary performative is expandable into a sentence with a verb in the first person singular indicative active or the second or third person indicative passive, which names the action carried out by the performative. Austin calls these verbs performative verbs or speech-act verbs, and since “state” is one of them, any constative is an implicit performative which can be made explicit by being prefaced by “I hereby state that”.

So *any* utterance is part of or all of doing of some action, and the only distinction that remains is between performative and non-performative *verbs*. Performative verbs name actions that are performed, wholly or partly, by saying something (“state”, “promise”); non-performative verbs name types of action which are independent of speech (“walk”, “sleep”). Austin estimates that there are up to 9,999 performative verbs and he tries to place them into a number of broad classes according to their illocutionary forces. The illocutionary force of an utterance is distinguished from its locution and from its perlocutionary effect as follows:

Directing language at an audience involves performing three simultaneous acts: a locutionary act, an illocutionary act and a perlocutionary act. To perform a locutionary act is to say something in what Austin (1962, 94) calls “the full normal sense”. It includes:

- The phonic act: uttering noises, phones.
- The phatic act: uttering noises that are part of a certain language, phemes.
- The rhetic act: using these noises with a certain sense and reference, rhemes.

But each locutionary act carries with it an illocutionary act, such as stating, promising, warning, betting, and so on. If a hearer, through her/his knowledge of the conventions of the language, grasps this act, there is uptake on her/his part of the illocutionary force of the utterance. The effect the illocutionary act has on the hearer is called the perlocutionary act, for example persuading, deterring, surprising, misleading or convincing. Perlocutionary acts are performed *by* saying something rather than *in* saying it, and the speaker has less control over them than over the illocutionary act: you cannot be sure that a warning will deter a person or that a plea will persuade them, and so on.

Austin (1962, Lecture 12) suggests that it is possible to distinguish a number of broad classes or families of speech acts, classified according to their illocutionary force:

Verdictives, e.g. giving a verdict, estimate, reckoning, appraisal or finding.

Excersitives, e.g. exercising powers, rights or influence, exemplified by voting, ordering, urging, advising, warning, etc.

Commissives, e.g. typified by promising or otherwise undertaking.

Behabitives, which have to do with social behaviour and attitudes, for example apologizing, congratulating, commending, condoling, cursing and challenging.

Expositives, which show how our utterances fit into the course of an argument or conversation, e.g. “I reply”; “I argue”; “I concede”; “I illustrate”; “I assume”; “I postulate”.

In Searle’s development of the theory to perform speech acts comes to be seen as engaging in rule-governed behaviour. For example, the rules for the use of any illocutionary force indicator for promising are that (Searle 1969, 63):

1. Any illocutionary force indicating device, P, for promising is to be uttered only in the context of an utterance . . . which predicates some future act, A, of the speaker, S.
2. P is to be uttered only if the hearer, H, would prefer S’s doing A to her/his not doing A.
3. P is to be uttered only if it is not obvious to both S and H that S will do A in the normal course of events.
4. P is to be uttered only if S intends to do A.
5. The utterance of P counts as an undertaking of an obligation to do A.

According to Searle (1979) knowing the rules for performing speech acts helps interlocutors to determine when an utterance having a particular mood, say interrogative (e.g. “Is that your coat on the floor?”), functions as a question, and when it does not; or when an utterance in the imperative (e.g. “take a chair”) functions as an order, and when not; or when an utterance in the declarative (e.g. “it is cold in here”) functions as a statement and when it does not. In such cases, Searle suggests, a speaker means what s/he says but means something else as well, so that the utterance meaning includes the sentence meaning but extends beyond it; such speech acts have two illocutionary forces, one direct and one indirect. For a hearer to grasp both these forces at once, s/he must: know the rules for performing speech acts; share some background information with the speaker; exercise her/his powers of rationality and inference; and know certain general principles of cooperative conversation (see Chapter 7 on implicature and presupposition in translation and interpreting in this volume).

### Implications for practice of the notion of the speech act

There are two major advantages to be drawn from the notion of the speech act from the point of view of translation theory and practice. First, it can remind translators that it is permissible or even necessary not to render the exact “meaning” of whatever a speaker says in cases where that is not the main or only issue. To give a trite example, when a French host wishes his or her Danish guests “bon appetite”, it is not appropriate for their interpreter to render this into Danish as “god appetit”, because the equivalent invitation to begin to eat in Danish is “værsø” (which is a contraction of an expression in the imperative that would translate as “be so good” (“vær så god”), inviting the guests to be so good as to begin to eat). Second, Searle’s account suggests that it is possible to draw up guidelines for types of linguistic event for which classes of Austinian speech acts may be appropriate or inappropriate, depending on circumstances. For example, it may be inappropriate in some cultures to employ any exemplar from the verdictive class of speech acts in circumstances where the speaker is considered to be of a lower rank than the person whose possession or action is being referred to.

The notion of the speech act has been used to define a speech (Reisigl 2008, 243; quoted by Vuorikoski 2012, 154) as “a structured verbal chain of coherent speech acts uttered on a

special occasion for a specific purpose by a single person and addressed to a more or less specific audience”. Vuorikoski (2012, 161) herself focuses on the speech act “request”, which accounts for 14% of the 2,070 sentences contained in her corpus of speeches delivered in English and interpreted into Finnish, German and Swedish during plenary sessions of the European Parliament (EP). She suggests “that language philosophy may provide some aid for interpreters for understanding the EP political rhetoric” (2012, 156), although her own research is based on Sadock’s (1990) understanding of speech acts.

This kind of potential notwithstanding, speech-act theory fails to find an answer to the questions posed by Davidson (1973/1984, 125) for the theory of meaning. As Austin (1962, 149) puts it (*italics in the original*):

We may well suspect that the theory of ‘meaning’ as equivalent to ‘sense and reference’ will certainly require some weeding-out and reformulating in terms of the distinction between locutionary and illocutionary acts (*if these notions are sound*: they are only adumbrated here). I admit that not enough has been done here: I have taken the old ‘sense and reference’ on the strength of current views.

It is worth bearing this insight in mind: pragmatic theories generally take for granted that the semantics is given.

### Current debates and their implications

Quine’s pessimism regarding a theory of translation is part of his more general pessimism about whether there can be a theory of meaning at all; it is formulated and partly motivated by Quine’s (1960, 26) strictly empiricist theory of how we learn:

Surface irritations generate, through language, one’s knowledge of the world. One is taught so to associate words with words and other stimulations that there emerges something recognizable as talk of things, and not to be distinguished from truth about the world.

To illustrate the effect of this, imagine “*radical translation*, i.e. translation of the language of a hitherto untouched people” (Quine 1960, 28, *italics in the original*). In this scenario (1960, 29), “A rabbit scurries by, the native says ‘Gavagai’, and the linguist notes down the sentence ‘Rabbit’ (or ‘Lo, a rabbit’) as tentative translation, subject to testing in further cases”. But, Quine points out (1960, 31 and 51–52):

It is important to think of what prompts the native’s assent to ‘Gavagai?’ as stimulations and not rabbits . . . it is stimulations that must be made to match, not animals. [And] consider ‘gavagai’. Who knows but that the objects to which this term applies are not rabbits after all, but mere stages, or brief temporal segments, of rabbits. In either event, the stimulus situations that prompt assent to ‘Gavagai’ would be the same as for ‘Rabbit’. Or perhaps the objects to which ‘gavagai’ applies are all and sundry undetached parts of rabbits; again the stimulus meaning would register no difference. When from the sameness of stimulus meanings of ‘Gavagai’ and ‘Rabbit’ the linguist leaps to the conclusion that a gavagai is a whole enduring rabbit, he is just taking for granted that the native is enough like us to have a brief general term for rabbits and no brief general term for rabbit stages or parts.

As Hookway (1988, 134) points out, returning to the Wittgensteinian point about the inscrutability of ostension, it is not clear whether “Gavagai” means “There’s a rabbit” or,

“An undetached part of a rabbit is over there”, or “Rabbithood is instantiated over there”, or “A stage in the history of a rabbit is over there”, or “That spot is one mile to the left of an area of space one mile to the right of a rabbit”. Given the presence of the rabbit, each would be a possible meaning, depending on what the speaker’s “ontological commitment” was: to middle-sized objects like rabbits, or to rabbit parts, or to stages in the history of rabbits, or to areas of space. The only reliable evidence there is for what someone means are the circumstances attendant on their utterance, but these circumstances are subject to different ways of understanding the world, and we have no access to these different ways of understanding the world except for the speakers’ utterances. This conundrum is known as the circle of belief and meaning (see e.g. Lepore and Ludwig 2013), and unless we can break into it, the prospects for a theory of meaning are poor.

The problem, as we have seen, with the theories we have examined lies with the notion of reference or denotation, with the idea that there must be something that words “stand for”, in virtue of which (perhaps in conjunction with something like Frege’s sense (1892)) they have meaning. This notion, as Davidson (1967, 307) puts it, does not seem to “oil the wheels of a theory of meaning”. Given this, he suggests, it might be helpful to place a different predicate between one sentence and another sentence that is supposed to be the meaning of the first. He suggests that the predicate “is true” would be a good candidate, because truth is (1973/1984, 134) “a single property which attaches, or fails to attach, to utterances, while each utterance has its own interpretation” and because holding true is an attitude that it is reasonable to assume that most speakers have to their own utterances most of the time.

According to Tarski (1956), the truth predicate functions in such a way that for any sentence *S* here is a statement of the form, “*S* is true iff *p*”, where *p* is the translation of *S* into the language of the theory. An example of such a so-called T-sentence would be “‘Es regnet’ is true-in-German when spoken by *x* at time *t* if and only if it is raining near *x* at *t*” (Davidson 1973/1984, 135). A theory of truth assumes that speakers are able to agree, for any utterance, *U*, that “*U*” is true if and only if *C* where *C* is a description of the circumstances in which “*U*” is held true. And to have language, it is necessary to have a theory of truth: you have to believe that speakers utter what they believe to be true most of the time; if they did not, their language would not work and could not be taught/learned. Therefore (Davidson 1973/1984, 137):

The methodological advice to interpret in a way that optimizes agreement should not be conceived as resting on a charitable assumption about human intelligence that might turn out to be false. If we cannot find a way to interpret the utterances and other behaviour of a creature as revealing a set of beliefs largely consistent and true by our own standards, we have no reason to count that creature as rational, as having beliefs or as saying anything.

It has been mooted by e.g. Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 181) that truth may be culture specific and hence variable across cultures:

People with very different conceptual systems than our own may understand the world in a very different way than we do. Thus they may have a very different body of truths than we have and even different criteria for truth and reality.

But as Davidson (1974/1984, 183–189) points out, this position relies on a separation between the world “out there”, and the human conceptual systems that “organize” it:

Philosophers...are prone to talk of conceptual schemes...ways of organizing experience...points of view from which individuals, cultures...survey the passing

scene. There may be no translating from one scheme to another, in which case the beliefs, hopes, and bits of knowledge that characterize one person have no true counterparts for the subscriber to another scheme . . . Even those thinkers who are certain there is only one conceptual scheme are in the sway of the scheme concept; even monotheists have religion . . . Conceptual relativism is a heady and exotic doctrine, or would be if we could make good sense of it. The trouble is, as so often in philosophy, it is hard to improve intelligibility while retaining the excitement. . . . The notion of fitting the totality of experience, like the notion of fitting the facts, or of being true to the facts, adds nothing intelligible to the simple concept of being true. Nothing . . . *no thing*, makes sentences and theories true: not experience, not surface irritations, not the world, can make a sentence true. *That* experience takes a certain course . . . [makes] sentences and theories true.

So relativism does not threaten translation/interpreting viciously. The account places translation centrally in any act of communication by language and hence centrally in providing an account of it. Translation clearly merits serious investigation and serious consideration by anyone with an interest in the language sciences.

### Further reading

- Graying, A. C. 1982. *An Introduction to Philosophical Logic*. Sussex: The Harvester Press.  
An excellent introduction to a number of issues in semantics that are only touched on in this chapter.
- Hookway, C. 1988. *Quine: Language, Experience and Reality*. Cambridge: Polity Press and Stanford: Stanford University Press.  
Introduces and explains the work of Willard van Orman Quine, one of the most important American philosophers of the 20th century. It focuses particularly on Quine's theory of translational indeterminacy and compares it with Davidson's counterargument.
- Searle, J. R., ed. 1971. *The Philosophy of Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.  
The first three contributions to this volume, by Austin, Strawson and Searle, provide a comprehensive introduction to the theory of speech as action, which was fundamental in the development of pragmatics.

### Related topics

Semiotics and translation. Implicature and presupposition in translation and interpreting.

### References

- Austin, J. L. 1962. *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ayer, A. J. 1936/1971. *Language, Truth and Logic*. Harmondsworth: Pelican Books. First published by Victor Gollancz in 1936.
- Bühler, K. 1934. *Sprachtheorie*. Jena: Fischer.
- Davidson, D. 1967. Truth and meaning. *Synthese* 17(3), pp. 304–323.
- Davidson, D. 1973/1984. "Radical Interpretation". Reprinted from *Dialectica* 27, pp. 313–328, in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, 125–139. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Davidson, D. 1974/1984. "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme". Reprinted from *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*. Vol. 47, in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, 183–189. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Frege, G. 1892/1977. "On Sense and Reference". Reprinted from *Zeitschrift für Philosophie und philosophische Kritik*. Vol. 100, 25–50, in 1977 *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, edited by P. Geach and M. Black, 56–78. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

- Frege, G. 1918–19. “Der Gedanke: Eine logische Untersuchung” (“The Thought: A Logical Inquiry”). In *Beiträge zur Philosophie des Deutschen Idealismus* pp. 58–77. Reprinted 1956 in *Mind*, New Series, 65(259), pp. 289–311.
- Grayling, A. C. 1982. *An Introduction to Philosophical Logic*. Sussex: The Harvester Press.
- Grice, H. P. 1957. “Meaning”. *Philosophical Review* 66, pp. 377–388. Reprinted in *Philosophical Logic*, 1967, edited by P. F. Strawson, 39–48. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Halliday, M. A. K. 1970. Functional diversity in language. *Foundations of Language* 6, pp. 322–361.
- Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M. 1980. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lepore, E. and Ludwig, K. 2013. “Introduction”. In *A Companion to Donald Davidson*, edited by E. Lepore and K. Ludwig, 1–13. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Locke, J. 1689/1964. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Glasgow: William Collins Sons & Co Ltd.
- Lyons, J. 1977. *Semantics*, Vol. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Malmkjær, K. 1995/2002/2010/2013. “Speech Act Theory”. In *The Linguistics Encyclopedia*, 3rd ed., edited by K. Malmkjær, 497–505. 1st ed. 1995.
- Nord, C. 1997. *Translating as a Purposeful Activity: Functionalist Approaches Explained*. Manchester: St Jerome.
- Palmer, F. R. 1981. *Semantics*, 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pears, D. 1971. *Wittgenstein*. London: Fontana/Collins.
- Putnam, H. 1970/1975. “Is Semantics Possible?” Reprinted from *Languages, Belief and Metaphysics*, edited by H. Kiefer and M. Munitz, New York: State University of New York Press in Putnam, H. 1975. *Mind, Language and Reality: Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 2: 139–152. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Quine, W. V. O. 1960. *Word and Object*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Reisigl, M. 2008. “Rhetoric of Political Speeches”. In *Handbook of Communication in the Public Sphere*, edited by R. Wodak and V. Koller, 243–270. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Russell, B. 1905. On denoting. *Mind* 14(56), pp. 479–493.
- Sadock, J. M. 1990. “Comments on Vanderveken and on Cohen and Levesque”. In *Intentions in Communication*, edited by P. R. Cohen, J. Morgan and M. E. Pollack, 257–270. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Schlick, M. 1936. Meaning and verification. *Philosophical Review* 45(4), pp. 339–369.
- Searle, J. R. 1969. *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Searle, J. R. 1979. “Metaphor”. In *Metaphor and Thought*, edited by A. Ortony, 92–123. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Strawson, P. F. 1950/1972. “On referring”. *Mind* 1950, pp. 320–344. Reprinted in *New Readings in Philosophical Analysis*, edited by H. Feigl, W. Sellars, and K. Lehrer. 1972, 35–50. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.
- Tarski, A. 1956. “The Concept of Truth in Formalized Languages”. In *Logic, Semantics, Metamathematics* edited by A. Tarski. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Vuorikoski, A.-R. 2012. “Fine-tuning SI Quality Criteria: Could Speech Act Theory be of any Use?” Available from: [https://www.academia.edu/3352593/Fine-tuning\\_SI\\_Quality\\_Criteria\\_Could\\_Speech\\_Act\\_Theory\\_be\\_of\\_any\\_Use](https://www.academia.edu/3352593/Fine-tuning_SI_Quality_Criteria_Could_Speech_Act_Theory_be_of_any_Use).
- Wittgenstein, L. 1958. *Philosophical Investigations*, 2nd ed. Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.