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Meaning
Bedeutung

Englisch / Deutsch

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Great Papers Philosophie

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Consider the following sentences:

“Those spots mean (meant) measles.”

“Those spots didn’t mean anything to me, but to the doctor they meant measles.”

“The recent budget means that we shall have a hard year.”

(1) I cannot say, “Those spots meant measles, but he hadn’t got measles,” and I cannot say, “The recent budget means that we shall have a hard year, but we shan’t have.” That is to say, in cases like the above, *x meant that p* and *x means that p* entail *p*.

(2) I cannot argue from “Those spots mean (meant) measles” to any conclusion about “what is (was) meant by those spots”; for example, I am not entitled to say, “What was meant by those spots was that he had measles.” Equally I cannot draw from the statement about the recent budget the conclusion “What is meant by the recent budget is that we shall have a hard year.”

(3) I cannot argue from “Those spots meant measles” to any conclusion to the effect that somebody or other meant by those spots so-and-so. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same is true of the sentence about the recent budget.

(4) For none of the above examples can a restatement be found in which the verb “mean” is followed by a sentence

or phrase in inverted commas. Thus “Those spots meant measles” cannot be reformulated as “Those spots meant ‘measles’” or as “Those spots meant ‘he has measles.’”

(5) On the other hand, for all these examples an approximate restatement can be found beginning with the phrase “The fact that …”; for example, “The fact that he had those spots meant that he had measles” and “The fact that the recent budget was as it was means that we shall have a hard year.”

Now contrast the above sentences with the following:

“Those three rings on the bell (of the bus) mean that the ‘bus is full.’” [378]

“That remark, ‘Smith couldn’t get on without his trouble and strife,’ meant that Smith found his wife indispensable.”

(1) I can use the first of these and go on to say, “But it isn’t in fact full – the conductor has made a mistake”; and I can use the second and go on, “But in fact Smith deserted her seven years ago.” That is to say, here *x means that p* and *x meant that p* do not entail *p*.

(2) I can argue from the first to some statement about “what is (was) meant” by the rings on the bell and from the second to some statement about “what is (was) meant” by the quoted remark.

(3) I can argue from the first sentence to the conclusion that somebody (viz., the conductor) meant, or at any rate should have meant, by the rings that the bus is full, and I can argue analogously for the second sentence.

(4) The first sentence can be restated in a form in which the verb “mean” is followed by a phrase in inverted commas, that is, “Those three rings on the bell mean ‘the bus is full.’” So also can the second sentence.

(5) Such a sentence as “The fact that the bell has been rung three times means that the bus is full” is not a restatement of the meaning of the first sentence. Both may be true, but they do not have, even approximately, the same meaning.

When the expressions “means,” “means something,” “means that” are used in the kind of way in which they are used in the first set of sentences, I shall speak of the sense, or senses, in which they are used, as the *natural* sense, or senses, of the expressions in question. When the expressions are used in the kind of way in which they are used in the second set of sentences, I shall speak of the sense, or senses, in which they are used, as the *nonnatural* sense, or senses, of the expressions in question. I shall use the abbreviation “means$_{NN}$” to distinguish the nonnatural sense or senses.

I propose, for convenience, also to include under the head of natural senses of “mean” such senses of “mean” as may be exemplified in sentences of the pattern “*A* means (meant) *to do* so-and-so (by *x*),” where *A* is a human agent. By contrast, as the previous examples show, I include under the head of non-natural [379] senses of “mean” any senses of “mean” found in sentences of the patterns “*A* means (meant) something by *x*” or “*A* means (meant) by *x*

that. …" (This is overrigid; but it will serve as an indication.)

I do not want to maintain that *all* our uses of "mean" fall easily, obviously, and tidily into one of the two groups I have distinguished; but I think that in most cases we should be at least fairly strongly inclined to assimilate a use of "mean" to one group rather than to the other. The question which now arises is this: "What more can be said about the distinction between the cases where we should say that the word is applied in a natural sense and the cases where we should say that the word is applied in an nonnatural sense?" Asking this question will not of course prohibit us from trying to give an explanation of "meaning$_{NN}$" in terms of one or another natural sense of "mean."

This question about the distinction between natural and nonnatural meaning is, I think, what people are getting at when they display an interest in a distinction between "natural" and "conventional" signs. But I think my formulation is better. For some things which can mean$_{NN}$ something are not signs (e. g., words are not), and some are not conventional in any ordinary sense (e. g., certain gestures); while some things which mean naturally are not signs of what they mean (cf. the recent budget example).

I want first to consider briefly, and reject, what I might term a causal type of answer to the question, "What is meaning$_{NN}$?" We might try to say, for instance, more or less with C. L. Stevenson,[1] that for *x* to mean$_{NN}$ something, *x* must have (roughly) a tendency to produce in an audience