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INTERACTIONAL TROUBLE
AND THE ECOLOGY OF MEANING

Drawing on the methods of conversation analysis (Sidnell, 2010; Sidnell and Stivers, 2012) and the data provided by recordings of ordinary interaction, in this paper I ask what a radically empirical approach to word meaning might look like. Specifically, I explore the possibility that we might investigate linguistic meaning through a consideration of interactional troubles. That is, when participants in interaction confront apparent troubles of meaning, what do those troubles consist in? What is the missing something that leaves participants in interaction feeling as though they do not understand what another means? Four types of trouble in interaction are discussed: troubles of exophoric or anaphoric reference, troubles of common ground, troubles of lexical meaning, troubles of sense.

Key words: meaning, interaction, conversational repair, conversation analysis

Introduction

The problem of meaning has long been framed in terms of a debate between two diametrically opposed positions (see Taylor, 1980; Hacking, 1975). On the one hand, "the designative tradition" focuses on what terms denote or designate, on word-object relations, and thus on the relation between language and the world. Proponents of this view, from Plato to Russell, emphasize the referential or representational possibilities of language and imagine a "perfect language" in which there might be a strict one-to-one mapping between word and referent. While, as Taylor argues, this tradition may have been elaborated in relation to the epistemological concerns of the scientific revolution, it has roots in Ancient philosophy and also in Augustine. It appeared to reach a climax in the early

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Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and a crisis in the later Wittgenstein's *Investigations* but was resuscitated and has become the dominant approach in the era of computing, cognitive science and so on. On this view, meaning and with it language is *essentially* private and *accidentally* public.[1]

On the other hand, the expressive tradition emphasizes the constitutive character of language. The romantic philosophers of the 19th century, Herder and Humboldt for example, argued that language constitutes who we are, what we experience and how we live. On this view, it is not extension but rather intensional semantic relations that are the essence of meaning. An obvious point for proponents of this view is that meanings do not reside in what exists out there independently of language, but rather in what is created or constituted by language itself – in Fregean "sense-relations". The intension of a term is the concept it specifies rather than the range of entities to which it refers. For philosophers such as Herder, meaning is not a natural or automatic relation but rather a matter of setting up normative, which is to say communally regulated, relations and notions of correctness. On this view, meaning and with it language is *essentially* public and *accidentally* private.

Remarkably, both these approaches, and others as well, never ask what meaning amounts to as a practical matter of daily life and ordinary talk (see Enfield, 2014). That is, what does "meaning" do? How are word meanings actually used by persons in the course of speaking to one another? To be fair, Wittgenstein (1922, 1953, 1969) had begun to pose questions of this kind in his later work but for the most part his interests were elsewhere and his consideration of language was one piece of a larger argument about and with philosophy. Wittgenstein never articulated a positive account of meaning even if his various remarks point in a particular direction.

What if we take a radically empirical approach to the problem of meaning and ask – when persons encounter troubles with the meaning of an expression what do those troubles look like? What's the missing "something" that leads a speaker or a hearer to experience an utterance or some specific word as involving a trouble of meaning? In what follows I want to ask that question by considering a set of such cases from ordinary interaction among English-speaking persons. The discussion draws on the methods and analytic techniques of conversation analysis (CA, see Sidnell, 2010, 2012; Sidnell and Stivers eds., 2012).[2] CA is an approach to talk-in-interaction which adopts a naturalistic, empirical perspective on human behavior. Analysis begins with the data of naturally-occurring interaction and proceeds by identifying the stable and recurrent practices that

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[1] Of course reference-based approaches cannot be subsumed under a single standpoint given that the very definition of reference is a matter of some debate.

[2] There are approaches from other disciplines that reach quite similar conclusions. See, for instance De Jaegher, H. & Di Paolo, E. (2007), Fusaroli, R., Gangopadhyay, N., & Tylén, K. (2014), and especially Enfield, N.J. (2014).

participants use to accomplish action. One large set of studies in this tradition has considered the practices involved in identifying and potentially resolving troubles of understanding. For the most part, these form a single coherent system or organization that we refer to as "repair" (see Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks, 1977; Hayashi, Raymond and Sidnell eds., 2013; Hayashi, Raymond and Sidnell, 2013).

In what follows, four broad categories of trouble are described. First, there are troubles encountered in making reference either exophorically (ostensive) to objects in the co-present environment or anaphorically by indexing referents assumed to be in common ground. Second, there are troubles that result from more expansive assumptions about common ground or shared background knowledge. Third, there are troubles resulting from the use of a word or phrase that is not recognized by its recipient. Fourth, there are troubles that result from extensionally-adequate but intensionally-problematic expressions.

A description of these four types of trouble along with the practices of repair that persons routinely use to address them provides insight into the "ecology of meaning." Specifically, we can see that *participants in interaction treat the meaning of an expression as a fundamentally practical matter* – in some cases, meaning is treated as equivalent with referential extension; the meaning of a word is simply the set of things it is used to denote. In other cases, however, participants show a clear orientation to the "sense" of an expression as opposed to its reference. An ecological account cannot then afford to reduce meaning to reference but rather must attend to intensional-sense relations as well as indexical and context-tied aspects of meaning.

Four types of trouble

In this section I will briefly describe and exemplify four commonly encountered types of trouble. I will not dwell on specifics here since the goal is simply to convey the sense in which these are indeed recurrent "types" with each case displaying a set of stable features. Participants orient to them as types and draw upon a restricted set of practices in attempting to resolve them.

Troubles of exophoric and anaphoric reference

As noted above, the dominant approach to meaning in philosophy and the human sciences is one that emphasizes reference. Clearly, language is used to refer and users of language routinely treat reference as a necessary if not always sufficient component of the meaning of the token use of some term. By troubles of reference I mean cases in which the speaker attempts to refer to something using a term or expression that they believe is information-sufficient (given assumptions about the attentional field and common ground) but the recipient is unable to identify that to which reference is being made. Consider the following case from interaction among small children. In (1) M and J are facing two chairs that have been set beside each other. M, noticing a difference in height between

the two (identical looking) chairs remarks, "wonder why this is higher". Although M and J appear to be jointly attending the same set of objects, this utterance has the character of an "out-loud" and is not obviously addressed to J. At line 04, M announces a just-discovered solution to the puzzle: " 'cause it's <u>ma</u>::de <u>higher</u>." M's "<u>wo</u>nder why this is higher" expresses uncertainty and can thus perhaps be heard as a question. The talk at line 04 is designed as an answer to that question. J's "what's made higher." targets M's just prior turn for repair and locates "it" as the trouble source.[3]

(1) Kids_JK_T8.mov 24:21

```
01   M:          I have the higher place ((looking at chairs))
02               wonder why this is higher
03               (0.8)
04               'casue it's ma::de higher. Ah:::::
05               (0.2)
06   J:   →      what's made higher.
07   M:          ((taps the chair top))
08               see 'cause look. I cant even get up 'cause it's too high
```

As M produces the talk at lines 01 and 02 he and J are kneeling in front of the two chairs. Each boy has a toy placed on the chair he is facing. As M begins to talk he brings his gaze from his toy to underneath the chair and eventually to the place where the chair legs meet the floor. By the end of line 02 he has reoriented so that he is gazing underneath the chair. J follows M's gaze and by the end of line 02 is similarly oriented towards the floor. M's talk at line 04 elicits J's gaze but as J says "What's made higher." he turns to look at the top of the chairs again.

In this case then we can see that both J and M treat the meaning of "it" as essentially equivalent to reference. Whatever other semantic or characterizing features "it" (or "this" for that matter) might have, such as 'singular' and 'non-human', these are treated as serving a simple ancillary function of distinguishing the intended referent from others in the environment. So when M goes on to repair the problematic term he does it with a finger tapping point that refers by directing J's gaze and thus his attention to the chair.

Troubles of reference seem to fall into two broad categories – ostensive or exophoric on the one hand and anaphoric on the other. There are various formats which speakers use to make exophoric reference and any of them can result in trouble for a recipient. Some typical formats include bare demonstratives (e.g. "this," "that"), demonstrative determiner with lexical noun (e.g. "that block,")

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[3] Episodes of repair are composed of parts. A repair initiation marks a possible disjunction with the immediately preceding talk while a repair outcome results either in a solution or abandonment of the problem. That problem, the particular segment of talk to which the repair is addressed, is termed the "trouble source" or "repairable" (see Schegloff et al., 1977; Sidnell, 2010; Hayashi et al., 2013).

or with an anaphor (e.g. "that one"), definite determiner with lexical noun (e.g. "the map") and so on. Anaphoric formats include the full range of anaphors used in ordinary conversation – i.e. proterms. Caution must be exercised here though as these are not totally discrete types and reference is often accomplished by a combination of exophoric and anaphoric formats (as in 1 above).

In making reference with a definite noun phrase, the speaker embeds a claim (or presupposition) that the thing referred to exists (see Russell's analysis of so-called definite descriptions, Russell, 1905; see also Recanati, 1997). Moreover, the definite character of the reference conveys the expectation that the recipient should be able to identify/recognize the thing talked about. The noun part of the reference form characterizes, describes or formulates the referent in some way. These are complex forms then that combine a claim about the existence and identifiability or recognizability of some referent with a characterization of that referent.[4] Either component of the complex reference form can result in trouble and be targeted for repair. In (2), again from interaction among young children, Will refers to one of several planes the group has constructed of Lego blocks using the phrase "the biggie." Repair is initiated by a question-intoned repeat of the prepositional phrase.

(2) Kids_SK_T4.mov @ 10.54

```
01  W:         This is a type that attaches, onto the biggie.
02  A: →       Onto the biggie? =
03  S:         = Yeah like this,
04  W:         ((machine gun noises))
```

In (3) R makes a first-mention reference to "the Tornado."

(3) Kids_SK_T12.mov@20:20

```
01  R:         Wo::::::::::::W
02  R:         My robot got picked up by the Tornado
03             (0.4)
04  A: →       What Tornado.
05  R:         A Tornado, (0.2) it spins round an' round.
```

Here the problem results, in part, from the use of an invented term (apparently for just this occasion) – "biggie". In (3) the term used is perfectly familiar but the expression is nevertheless targeted for repair. The problem in this case results from the fact that "the tornado" is a completely imagined entity – there is of course no real tornado in the visual field of these participants (rather reference to it is meant to bring it into existence within an imaginary

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[4] These forms also seem to embed a claim about the singularity of the referent (which one?). Where multiple, equivalent referents exist a speaker will use "That X," see next section.

play-world). A definite noun phrase such as "the biggie" or "the tornado" presupposes that the recipient should be able to identify some entity being talked about. Such referring expressions thus embody a claim about knowledge shared between speaker and recipient.

Troubles of common ground

As noted, troubles of reference are also troubles of common ground (see Clark, 1996). That is to say, reference typically fails because the speaker has assumed a degree of common ground, joint attention or shared knowledge, which does not exist. Another set of troubles involve more expansive assumptions about knowedge shared between the participants. Here the problem hinges not so much on reference per se but on broader orientations and relevancies. In these cases then we find a recipient of some utterance claiming that presuppositions requisite to its understanding are not shared by the recipient (Raymond and Sidnell, 2013). Consider for instance the following case:

(4) Debbie and Shelley

```
01  She:          distric' attorneys office.
02  Deb:          Shelley: ¿
03  She:          Debbie: ¿ =
04  Deb:  →       what is tha dea::l.
05  She:          whadayou -mean.
06  Deb:          yuh not gonna go::?
07                (0.2)
08  She:          well -hh now: my boss wants me to go: an: uhm finish
09                this >stupid< trial thing,u[hm]
```

Here at line 04, Debbie asks "what is the deal". In response, Shelley claims not to know what Debbie is talking about, saying "whadayou mean." In a case like this the problem is quite complex – it might be characterized for instance as a trouble resulting from the use of the phrase "the deal" and indeed as a problem of reference in that respect. However, the larger problem appears to be that Debbie has supposed that Shelley shares the same orientation to recent events such that she does not need to be explicit in talking about them but rather can allude to them with "the deal." A similar case is shown below:

(5) Trio 2 (Repair)

```
01  Pri:          H'llo::.
02                (.)
03  Mar:          Priscilla?
04                (.)
05  Pri:          Ye:a:h.
06                (0.2)
07  Mar:          What happen'tuhda:y.
```

```
08              (0.6)
09  Pri:        Whaddiyuh mea::n.
10              (.)
11  Mar:        What happened et wo:rk. Et Bullock's this evening.
12  Pri:        ˙hhhh Wul I don' kno:::w::.
13  Mar:        My-Loretta jus ca:lled'n she wz goin:g went by: there
14              et five thirdy you know on'er way ho::me…
```

Here Priscilla finds the question "What happen'tuhda:y." problematic and initiates repair with "what do you mean". The question suggests that Priscilla can provide a report regarding an yet unnamed, though presumed-to-be-known-in--common, event. Notice the way that at line 11, Marjorie elaborates the query, specifying what it is she is asking about by adding "at work," "at Bullocks" and "this evening." In this way Marjorie provides just that information that her original query took to be in common ground and shared.

We are here again clearly in the domain of utterer's meaning. As Garfinkel (1967) noted much of the meaning that a recipient ascribes an utterance is never made explicit. Under normal circumstances, speakers and recipients assume that the meaning of what is said is clear. However there are times when problems arise that prevent the onward development of whatever business it is that the participants are engaged in. In cases such as 4 and 5 that problem appears to result from the speaker assuming that the recipient shares with her an orientation to, and thus presuppositions about, recent events when in fact that is not the case. In their subsequent conduct, we can see then that participants treat this as a crucial aspect of the meaning of what is said.

Troubles of Lexical Knowledge

We can distinguish such troubles of reference and shared knowledge from troubles of word recognition (lexical-knowledge) that have troubles of reference as a consequence or by-product. In troubles of reference the intended meaning of the lexical expression is clear but its extension is not. Compare a case such as the following (from interaction among five year old children):

(6) ICS_12_13_05(1of1)SK_T16.mov 14:08

```
01  R:          Did you drive or did you take a airplane?
02              (0.8)
03  M:          airplane,
04  H:          I went in a cab
05              so I didn't have to drive my car
06              (0.4)
07  M:  →       what's a cab?
08  H:          it's uhm – it's a kind of ah
09              (0.4)
10              thing that takes some people some where,
11              they want to go,
```

Here an innocent use of the word "cab" produces trouble for one of the recipients (M) who subsequently asks, "What's a cab." This meta-linguistic question (See Jakobson, 1957, 1985, 1960) receives in response a gloss which is an attempt specify the "meaning" of the expression. Similarly in 7 and 8 the expressions "tarter sauce" and "barnacle" are treated as unknown to their recipients who request "meanings" for these expressions. In each case the meaning is provided as a metalinguistic gloss of the sense of the expression.

(7) G3_T7_2:50

```
01   S:        Tarter sauce.  ehh
02   J:        Tarter sauce.
03             (0.2)
04             What is tarter sauce.
05   S:        It's uhm a sauce th- the sauce you put on French fries.
06   J:        Oh.
```

(8) G3_T11_37:10

```
01   Sh:       who's sha:ki:ing   [I:t,
02   V:                           [ah ha hah
03   Sh:       Vi:ckie:you barnacle head.
04   V:        What's a barnacle.
05   Sh:       A barnacle is uh
06             (.)
07   S:        a thing that attach to ships.
```

These glosses exhibit a recurrent format in which a categorical identification is combined with a restrictive relative clause that is denotationally more specific than the category identification and thus serves as a gloss of the problematic term (see Agha, 2007: 386).

Table 1. Solutions to troubles of lexical knowledge

Target	Category		Gloss
It's	a kind of thing	that	takes some people somewhere they want to go.
It's	a sauce	that	you put on French fries.
A barnacle is	a thing	that	attach to ships.

The denotationally-specifying component can identify a function (e.g. taking people where they want to go) or a characteristic (e.g. attach to ships). Notice that the gloss is fitted to the particular use of the word. Thus although the verb is specified for timeless-nomic inflections ("is" = present tense, indicative mood, active voice, simple aspect, 3rd person) the "meanings" presented are actually quite contextually-specific. So, in (6) the child is telling a story about how her family travelled to the airport and the specification of "taking some people where they want to go" is clearly tied to that story in a way that "a privately owned and operated car for hire" would not be. What we want to see then is that, for participants in interaction, meanings are not timeless "definitions" but rather context-specific, interactionally relevant "glosses" or "formulations."

Troubles of sense

In other cases the trouble results not from a lexical expression that is unknown to the recipient but rather from the *use* or application of a familiar item in a particular way. Intensional-sense relations identify complex, concepts as referents. As such, in some of these cases (9 and 10), a problem of sense-intensional relations is treated as preventing reference from being successfully accomplished. Consider the following case:

(9) Chubak workplace collection

```
07   Stef:        h so when are you done Porter.
08                (1.5)
09   Mike:        whaddayah mean by done?
10   Stef:        hhh h like when can you remove yourself
11                from that process.
```

Here when a superior at work asks Mike when he will be "done" with a project he is working on, Mike responds by asking "whaddayah mean by done?" thereby claiming a problem of understanding the meaning of "done" in this context. The lexical meaning of the word "done" is presumably not the cause of trouble here. Rather it is the particular notion or sense of "done" in this context that is in question. Stef responds here by specifying "like when can you remove yourself from that process."

And, in the following case, Freda and Rubin have been admiring a wall-hanging at the home of their hosts, Kathy and Dave. Kathy, a weaver and the artist who made the object of their praise, demurs by saying, "It wove itself once it was set up.=" thus responding to the compliment by suggesting that it took little effort and skill to make. In response Rubin asks, "Whaddyou mean it wove itself once it w's set up.=" and further "=[What d's that] mean.=".

(10) KC-4, 16   6.

```
11   Kat:        It wove itself once it was set up. =
12   Fre:        = It's woo:l?
13   Kat:        It's wool.
14                (0.8)
15   Rub:        Whaddyou mean it wove itself once it w's set up. =
16                = [What d's that] mean. =
17   Kat:        = [ O h  i -  ]
18   Kat:        = Well I mean it's ve:ry simple, (˙hhh)
19                (0.8)
20   Kat:        It's  exac[tly the same in the we]:ft as it is in the warp.
21   Dav:                   [ She also means th't- ]
22                (0.2)
23   Kat:        That is if the warp has sixteen greens an two blacks an
24                two light blues and two blacks an sixteen greens an:
25                sixteen blacks on sixteen blues an so on, ˙ hh y'know the
26                warp are the long pieces.
27                (0.5)
28   Fre:        Mhhm
29   Kat:        The weft has exactly tha:t.
30   Fre:        Yah.
```

Here then the meaning of the lexical expression (or phrase) is apparently available to the recipient but the use in this particular context results in a trouble of understanding.[5] Here, to draw on Grice's (1968) terminology, recipients find the "utterer's meaning" unclear even while "sentence-meaning" and "word-meaning" are transparent.

A related kind of trouble can occur when the reference is clear yet problems of sense or "mode of presentation," as Frege would have it, persist. That is, as can be seen from a consideration of the cases below, there are occasions when a recipient understands perfectly well what it is the speaker is talking about (i.e. referring to) but nevertheless treats the expression used as a problematic characterization or description (see Sidnell and Barnes 2013). Consider, for example, the following case in which children are playing with blocks. When the structure falls, A screams and, at line 01, the supervising adult complains, "Guys too loud." This occasions an excuse from A who assigns responsibility to C by saying "She po::ked it," in reference to the structure she is building. In the next turn C replaces "po::ked" with "ta:pped."

(11) Kids_G2_T1_37:00

```
01   Ad:          Guys too loud.
02   A:   →       She po::ked it.
03   C:   →       I ta: pped it.
04                (0.2)
05   A:           Well you knocked it over.
```

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[5] Moreover, the claim not to have understood is used as a way to challenge the speaker's claim (that it took little effort) and thereby defend the original compliment.

```
06   C:          No I didn't.
07   A:          Yes you did.
08   C:          Oh whatever.
```

In (12), taken from an interview between reporter Andrea Canning and actor Charlie Sheen, Canning refers to Sheen's "anger" and "hate" at line 01-02. At line 03 Sheen replaces this with "passion."

(12) Charlie Sheen Interview – Anger/Hate vs. Passion

```
01   Canning:    Your anger. an' your hate. I think is coming
02               off as erratic. Tuh peo[ple.
03   Sheen:                       [passion. (.) My passion
04               (0.2)
05               It's all [passion
06   Canning:    [okay your passion, =
07   Sheen:      = yes. =
08   Canning:    = is coming off as erratic
```

In these cases recipients treat what the speaker is talking about as unproblematic, which is to say, there is no problem of reference. However, by offering a subsequent, alternate description recipients thereby claim that the first formulation or construal of the referent was in some sense inadequate (see Sidnell and Barnes, 2013).

Participants' orientation to the essential features of an expression's meaning

In the preceding discussion, I have attempted to show that in their interaction with one another, conversationalists orient to various aspects of meaning. For participants, meaning is sometimes reducible to reference – i.e. the extension of a token in some particular moment of interaction. In other cases, the meaning of a term is understood as the intensional-sense relations that specify a conceptual object. On occasion these sense relations may hinder the making of adequate reference but that is not always the case. That is, participants may identify a problem of intensional-sense relations even where those relations have, demonstrably, provided for successful reference. There are also, of course, cases in interaction where participants are confronted by an unfamiliar word. In such a situation they may request a gloss or "meaning" of the term. I have tried to show that although such meanings may be presented as timeless definitions, in fact the glosses produced appear to be fitted to the specific use of the word and thus the particular context in which the interaction takes place.

My larger aim here has been to suggest that "meaning" is an eminently practical matter for participants in interaction – for ordinary persons engaged in their ordinary business. Despite some suggestions along these lines from Wittgenstein and some general remarks from Garfinkel and Sacks, this possibility seems to

have been overlooked by almost all the scholarship in this area (see however Rączaszek-Leonardi and Kelso, 2008; Rączaszek-Leonardi, 2016; as well as Enfield, 2014). The rather radical position I want to provisionally propose here is that meanings do not exist, *primarily*, in the minds of individuals or the collective consciousness of a community but rather in particular contexts of situated interaction.[6] Even here, it should be noted, meanings are not "solid." Rather they are merely adequate to allow for the onward development of interaction, the step-by-step progress of conversation – they are sufficient to allow for, at least, the feeling, among participants, of intersubjectivity (see Sidnell, 2014).

If this is the case it would suggest, as others such as Agha (2007) appear to argue, that pragmatics properly subsumes semantics. The meaning of an expression is just that which participants in interaction treat as essential to its proper, adequate use (a la Garfinkel, Wittgenstein). Imputing anything else beyond that involves decontextualizing an item or expression from its home – its ecology. That's a reasonable enough procedure and no one would want to question the usefulness of, for instance, dictionaries! But, on the view presented here, dictionaries (actual and metaphorical, i.e. "mental") do not consist of meanings but rather a sub-set range of possible uses of a token of a term and the associated referential extensions and sense-intensional relations of that use.

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[6] I say "primarily" to underscore the point that my position does not discount the fact that there are both individual, subjective and collective, conventionalized aspects of meaning. Within a given community of language users there is what Enfield calls the "effectively invariant semantic core" or "effectively invariant meaning" which is a methodological necessity yet a theoretical near-impossibility. Users are normatively accountable to such effectively invariant meanings in so far as they cannot use a word conventionally understood to mean X, to mean Y without thereby owing to others an account for such a usage.

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