

Meaning and Rule-Following

David Sanson

Illinois State University

dsanson@gmail.com

1 Naive Theory of Meaning (Locke?)

- Each word is associated with an idea.
- Ideas are “mental pictures”.
- Ideas represent in virtue of “matching” or “resembling” things in the world.

Examples: ‘green’, ‘square’, ‘horse’.

For extended critical discussion, see the Wittgenstein (1960).

Objection:

139(b). I see a picture; it represents an old man walking up a steep path leaning on a stick.—How? Might it not have looked just the same if he had been sliding downhill in that position? (Wittgenstein 1973, 139(b))

Question: what needs to be *added* to the account of representation?

Answers:

- need to add more to the picture (motion? arrows?)?

140. Then what sort of mistake did I make; was it what we should like to express by saying: I thought the picture forced a particular use on me? How could I think that? What did I think? Is there such a thing as a picture, or something like a picture, that forces a particular application on us; so that my mistake lies in confusing one picture with another?—For we might also be inclined to express ourselves like this: we are at most under a psychological, not a logical, compulsion. [...] So our ‘belief that the picture forced a particular application on us’ consisted in the fact that only the one case and no other occurred to us. (Wittgenstein 1973, 54–5)

- need to add a “rule” for interpreting the picture?
- other answers?

2 Meaning and Ostension

Augustine: Now do this: tell me—if I were completely ignorant of the meaning of the word ‘walking’ and were to ask you what walking is while you were walking, how would you teach me?

Adeodatus: I would do it a little more quickly, so that after your question you would be prompted by something novel [in my behavior], and yet nothing would take place other than what was to be shown.

Augustine: Don’t you know that walking is one thing and hurrying another? A person who is walking doesn’t necessarily hurry, and a person who is hurrying doesn’t necessarily walk. We speak of ‘hurrying’ in writing and reading and in countless other matters. Hence given that after my question you kept on doing what you were doing, [only] faster, I might have thought walking as precisely hurrying—for you added that as something new—and for that reason I would have been misled. (Augustine 1995, 3.6; see also W. V. Quine 1950, 622ff.)

Question: what needs to be *added* to account for our ability to learn the meaning of a word by ostension?

Possible answers:

- need to add more to the demonstration (what?)?
- need to add a “rule” for interpreting the demonstration (‘this kind of *bodily movement*’)?
- psychological facts about salience for us?
- other answers?

3 Meanings as Rules

- Each word is associated with a rule.
- To know the meaning of a word is to grasp this rule.

Examples: ‘green’, ‘square’, ‘horse’.

4 The Rule Following Paradox

No course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule (Wittgenstein 1973, 201).

First Example: Fill in the blanks: 2, 4, 6, 8, __, __. There is no unique correct answer to this question.

Second Example: In your past history of usage, you have applied the word ‘bos’ to all and only cows, none of which were purple. You are now presented with a purple cow. Should you apply the word ‘bos’ to it? If by ‘bos’ you meant *cow*, then the answer is that you should. But your past history of usage is not enough to determine this: maybe by ‘bos’ you meant *non-purple cow*.

Question: What facts about you determine which rule you are following?

5 Plus and quus.

I [...] use the word ‘plus’ and the symbol ‘+’ to denote a well-known mathematical function, addition. The function is defined for all pairs of positive integers. By means of my external symbolic representation and my internal mental representation, I ‘grasp’ the rule for addition. [...] Although I myself have computed only finitely many sums in the past, the rule determines my answer for indefinitely many new sums that I have never previously considered. This is the whole point of the notion that in learning to add I grasp a rule: my past intentions regarding addition determine a unique answer for indefinitely many new cases in the future (Kripke 1982, 7–8).

You grasp the rule for addition, and you use ‘plus’ and ‘+’ to denote it. But for some n , you have never attempted to add numbers larger than n . Suppose n is 57. So what is:

$$68 + 57 = \underline{\hspace{2cm}}$$

We can ask two questions about your answer. First, was it *mathematically* correct? Did you correctly compute the sum of 68 and 57? Suppose you did. Second, was it *metalinguistically* correct? Are you right to suppose that your linguistic intention was to use ‘+’ to denote addition?

This sceptic questions my certainty about my answer, in what I just called the ‘metalinguistic’ sense. Perhaps, he suggests, as I used the term ‘plus’ in the past, the answer I intended for ‘68 + 57’ should have been ‘5’! [...] So perhaps in the past I used ‘plus’ and ‘+’ to denote a function which I will call ‘quus’ and symbolize by ‘⊕’ (Kripke 1982, 8–9).

$$x \oplus y = \begin{cases} x + y & \text{if } x, y < 57 \\ 5 & \text{otherwise} \end{cases}$$

Question: What facts about you determine that for you 'plus' means plus rather than quus?

6 Dispositions?

You mean plus by 'plus' because you are disposed to perform addition, not quaddition.

Objection 1: your dispositions only determine a finite number of cases, and so don't uniquely determine that you mean addition.

Objection 2: for very large numbers, it makes no sense to suppose that you have any disposition to respond one way or another.

Objection 3: if the rule you are following is determined by your disposition, then you can never make mistakes.

7 Other Proposals?

8 Green and Grue (Goodman 1983, 72ff):

Grue x is *grue* if and only x is green observed before 12/3/2014, x is blue observed on or after 12/3/2014

Question: what facts about you determine that for you 'green' means green rather than grue?

References

- Augustine. 1995. "The Teacher." In *Against the Academicians and the Teacher*, edited by Peter King, 94–146. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Boghossian, Paul A. 1989. "The Rule-Following Considerations." *Mind* 98 (392): 507–49.
- Goodman, Nelson. 1983. *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast, Fourth Edition*. 4th ed. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hirsch, Eli. 1993. *Dividing Reality*. Oxford University Press.
- Kripke, Saul. 1982. *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Quine, W. V. 1950. "Identity, Ostension, and Hypostasis." *The Journal of Philosophy* 47 (22) (October): 621–633.
- Quine, Willard Van Orman. 1960. *Word and Object*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1960. *The Blue and Brown Books*. 2nd ed. New York: Harper Torchbooks.
- . 1973. *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. 3rd edition. New York: Pearson.