

CHAPTER-V

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Language is a system consisting of different linguistic categories such as names, predicates, connectives, quantifiers and their relation to each other. Simon Blackburn says :

The goal of systematic, compositional semantics is to form a view about how best to describe the functioning of individual terms in sentences and how to describe how given this functioning of their parts, sentences come to have the meanings they do ... a compositional semantics would form the "core" of a philosophy of language.¹

How meaning is possible is an important problem of philosophy of language and this problem is closely related with the problem of meaningfulness and meaninglessness. For how meaning is possible has an important bearing on how meaningless expressions are generated.

Let us see how meaning is possible or how one can understand a new sentence. Competent or native speakers of

1 Simon Blackburn, Spreading the word, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1984, pp.9-10.

any language are not restricted to use only previously known sentences. Language is not the aggregate of all words or all sentences which have in fact been already uttered. With the help of finite number of vocabulary and the rules of their combination we generate infinite number of new sentences we never heard before. Our understanding of the words and the syntax enables us to understand the meaning of new sentences. So we have to understand first what the words do and secondly, the set of rules for ordering those words. Finding out what the words do is to make a distinction between various categories or types of expression, for example, subjects, predicates, connectives, quantifiers and so on and to describe the function of expressions of those categories.

There are of course some philosopher who says that only sentences can have meaning. The word meaning should be determined only in the context of a sentence. It seems that though the exact meaning of a word or more properly the exact sense of a word, is determined in the context of a particular sentence or utterance of a particular sentence, at least a vague or an inexact sense of a word can be grasped without looking for it in a sentence. Moreover, a sentence necessarily has a certain structure. 'Structure' implies that what is structured has some definite parts which must

have some definite functions. Let us discuss what the different parts of the sentence e.g. subjects, predicates do or what linguistic functions are performed by the different linguistic categories like subject expression, predicate expression and so on.

We commonly use expressions of some kind to identify or refer to some individual, a group of individuals, certain place, certain process and so on. Strawson calls this way of using expressions the 'uniquely referring use'.¹ The expressions generally used for referring or identifying the objects are the proper names like 'Washington', 'Mary', 'Silvia'; pronouns like 'he', 'she', 'you', 'they', 'it', 'I' and the like; singular terms like 'the morning star', 'the first Mughal Emperor', 'The man who first land in the moon'; the demonstrative pronouns like 'this', 'that', 'these', 'those'. The view that expressions of the above types have only referring use is not without controversy. According to Frege some descriptive elements, that is, the sense of a name, is also the part of its meaning. In addition to reference, names must have sense also. Otherwise any two names of the same referent would have the same meaning.

(1) "The Morning star is the Evening Star" would mean

(2) The Morning star is the morning in so far as their

1 P.F.Strawson, Logico-Linguistic Papers, Methuen & Co.Ltd., London, 1971, p.1.

reference is concerned, but according to Frege, (1) and (2) cannot have the same meaning. It would not be irrelevant here to mention that Frege does not make any difference between the proper name and the definite descriptions. I do not want to enter into the deep issue whether the view that names have sense is correct or incorrect. The linguistic categories like names, predicates etc. have certain logic of their own and what is that logic is certainly controversial. It can be said simply that though in uttering some kind of referring expressions some ascriptions of property (some characteristic or particular aspect of the person we are talking about) are necessarily involved with the reference, they are not the primary concern of using a referring expression. Or more properly the characteristic(s) of the person is not the subject-matter of discussion in that particular context. If so, then in addition to that (those) characteristic(s) something more would not be said in the predicate expressions. We can illustrate clearly this point with the help of an example. Take the sentence "The present prime minister of India is a good speaker". The subject expression 'The present Prime Minister of India' is solely used to identify the person who is the present Prime Minister of India. Although some aspects or characteristics like 'He or she is a leader', 'He or she has been elected by secret ballot', 'He or she is the higher authority of India' are implicit in the meaning of the subject

expressions. But these aspects or characteristics are not the prime concern in uttering the above sentence. The expression is solely used to focus that the person identified by the expression 'The present Prime Minister of India' is a good speaker. Only in case of some controversy about the identification of the referent we may take into consideration those features.

Predicate expression generally classify or characterise the object identified by the subject expression, subject expression may be a proper name, a demonstrative pronoun or a singular term. Predicate expressions are what yield truth or falsity of a statement. Strawson says :

The statement or predication as a whole is true just in the case in which the predicate term does in fact apply to (is in fact 'true of') the object which the subject term (identifyingly) refers to. The statement or predication as a whole is false just in the case where the negation of the predicate term applies to that object, i.e., the case where the predicate term can be truthfully denied of that object.¹

Thus a predicate expression can be said to be attached with or fails to be attached with the subject expression. The truth

1 P.F.Strawson, Logico-Linguistic papers, Methuen & Co.Ltd., London, 1971, p.88.

and falsity of a statement completely depends upon this.

The above function of the subject expression and that of the predicate expression i.e., referring and characterizing respectively imply the asymmetrical relation between the subject and the predicate expression. Subject expression can never be true of whereas the predicate can be. Another asymmetrical relation between subject expression and predicate expression can be found in respect of negation. It is a linguistic convention that we negate the predicate expression but not the subject expression. The logic behind this is that by negating the predicate expression we can get an expression of the same type with contrary relation. But by negating the subject we get nothing. Strawson calls this 'the thesis of the asymmetry of subjects and predicates regarding negation'.¹

Looked at from the syntactic point of view a simple sentence is composed of two immediate constituents. One immediate constituent is the nominal (NP) and the other is the verbal (VP). The distinction between nominals and verbals is intrinsically related with the semantic category of subject and predicate. The function of referring and predicating corresponds to the distinction between the

1 Ibid., p.96.

nominal (NP) and the verbal (VP). Nominal and the verbal have their internal syntactic structure also. To say something meaningfully or for an expression to be meaningful the appropriate semantic or syntactic categories and their linear structure must follow. This is only necessary condition but not sufficient condition of meaningfulness. Broad grammatical arrangement does not assure of meaningfulness. If grammatical pattern could be sufficiently elaborated then perhaps meaningfulness would be equal to grammaticality. Otherwise meaningless expression would result.

It is the case that the meaningfulness of an expression is not only dependent on the broad categories of subjects (NP) and predicates (VP) and their functions but also on their way of combination or on their way of being arranged. The syntactic structure of a sentence can be fully understood by specifying the ultimate constituents of the sentence, that is, the words of which the sentence composed and their linear order. Modern linguists like Chomsky explains the linear order of a sentence by a method known as phrase structure or constituent structure. The method of phrase structure is analogous to the method of 'bracketing', a crucial concept of symbolic logic and Mathematics. The importance of this phrase structure grammar

lies in the fact that it removes the structural ambiguity involved in the sentence with the help of bracketing.

Chomsky's formulation of the phrase structure grammar is like this :

- (1) Sentence \rightarrow NP + VP
- (2) NP \rightarrow T + N
- (3) VP \rightarrow Verb + NP
- (4) T \rightarrow the
- (5) N \rightarrow [man, ball etc.]
- (6) Verb \rightarrow [hit, took, took, look etc.]

Thus the sentence "The man hit the ball" which is a meaningful sentence consists of first two constituents NP (the man) and VP (hit the ball). The NP further consists of T (the) and N (man); VP also consists of two further constituents V(hit) and NP (the ball).

In more formal and general way it can be said that a sentence is to be called meaningful if it is derived according to the phrase structure rules. The phrase structure rules determine the possible or permissible ordering of the given vocabulary to form a meaningful sentence. The question arises, whether these phrase structure rules has the capability of producing all the meaningful or well-formed sentences of English? Although Chomsky was aware of the fact that there are languages which can not be adequately described

within the phrase structure grammar he was not aware whether there are certain sentences of English that cannot be generated by a phrase structure grammar. In syntactic structures Chomsky says

... A weaker, but perfectly sufficient demonstration of inadequacy would be to show that the theory can apply only clumsily; that is, to show that any grammar that can be constructed in terms of this theory will be extremely complex, ad hoc, and 'unrevealing'.¹

Moreover, there are some cases where at least two analyses would result for a single unambiguous construction. Within the phrase structure grammar two analyses can be given to the unambiguous sentence "The dog is barking".

- (1) NP (The dog) + Aux. VP (is - ing) + VP(bark) and
- (11) NP (the dog) + Copula (is) + Adjective (barking)

But the second analysis is clearly counterintuitive.

Because of the limitations of phrase structure grammar Chomsky discovers a new level of linguistic structure, transformational grammar. A transformational grammar contains in addition to transformational rules the phrase structure

1 Noam Chomsky, Syntactic structures, The Hague, Mouton 1967, p.34.

rules. Transformational rules transform one phrase marker into another by adding or deleting some elements or by some placement of the same elements. In the phrase structure grammar two unrelated phrase structure rules are required for the active and the passive form of the same sentence. For example, 'I did the work' and 'The work was done by me' will be analysed respectively in this way.

(I) ((N) NP + (V + T + N) VP)

(II) ((T+N) NP + (V + V) + N) VP)

But in the transformational analysis instead of generating two unrelated phrase structures like ((N)NP + (V+T+N) VP) and ((T+N)NP + (V+V) + N) VP) we can say that the sentence "The work was done by me" can be analysed on the basis of the principle of transforming an active sentence into the passive. This can be done by means of an optional rule which is like this :

$$NP_1 + Aux. + V + VP_2 \longrightarrow NP_2 + Aux. + be + en + V + by + NP_1$$

This transformational model of generative grammar focuses attention on the issue how different types of sentences are related with each other or in other words how different types of simple sentences derive from the same underlying string but from different optional transformations. "Did he murdered John ?", "Didn't he murdered John ?", "John was

not murdered by him", "Wasn't John murdered by him?", "Wasn't he murdered John?" all these sentences derive by applying different transformational rule to the simple, active declarative sentence "He murdered John". Chomsky calls these last type of sentences as 'kernel sentence'.

Semantic and syntactic rules make the proper arrangement of words - words which belong to different categories. Some words are the name of a particular thing, person, and place while some others are the name of some process and so on.

Now the question may rise what makes it true that a particular word is the name of a particular thing, process, place etc. etc. ? In most simple way it can be said that it is our convention which determines whether a particular word is the name of a particular thing, process, place and so on. To use the word 'convention' in a general sense raises difficulty. The word 'convention' has a subtler sense for us, than the ordinary sense like 'some people or a group of people gather and agreeing to take various words to refer to various things and characteristics'. Language may not be conventional in the ordinary sense of the term. Because any kind of agreement presupposes the already existing language and it goes to infinite regress. For this difficulty

we will use the word 'convention' in a special sense - the sense of 'accepted use'. David Lewis takes the word 'convention' in the sense of 'regularity'. We follow this 'regularity' or accepted use because of our personal interest. It makes possible to communicate our ideas, our personal needs, to share our feelings and emotions. We have habits of taking one another in definite ways. Simon Blackburn says the following in this context :

Asserting that a regularity is conventional means showing that we need to co-ordinate on some feature out of choice of equally serviceable ones, and that the reason we adhere to one is at least in part, that we expect others to do the same.¹

There exists no natural relation between certain sounds or words and the things signified by the words. Words are arbitrarily and conventionally instituted by our society. The significant remarks of Locke, I think, would not be irrelevant here to mention.

Man though he has great variety of thoughts 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 appear. The comfort and advantage of society

1 Simon Blackburn, Spreading the word, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1984, p.122.

not being to be had without communication of thought ... For this purpose, nothing was so fit, either for plenty or quickness, as those articulate sounds ... Thus we may conceive of how words came to be made use of by men as the sign of their ideas; not by any natural connexion that is between particular articulate 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.¹

So it may be said from the above discussion that to produce a meaningful expression of a language is to follow a complex mechanism - a mechanism which is at least partly settled by the social convention. The rules of semantics and syntax of our language is the guiding principle of the manner we should use our language. These rules mark not only meaningless and arbitrary restrictions on the pattern of combination of terms but make the communication possible. The rules of the language is not so rigid like the rules of the chess or board games. The complex mechanism of our language demands certain degrees of freedom on the part of the user of language. And there are every possibility that the user of language may misuse his freedom and as a result

1 John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Vol. II, Book III, Chapter II, para. 1, 11, 12.

meaningless expressions result. User of the language can misuse his freedom only unknowingly because no one want to produce meaningless expression deliberately except some cases where they are artificially produced to make a contrast with meaningless expressions like "Saturday is in bed", "Socrates is a prime number" and so on.