

TRANSLATIONAL SEMANTICS: a discussion of the second edition
of Geoffrey Leech's *Semantics: the Study of Meaning*

Nigel Love

1 Introduction

It is widely accepted that a description of a natural language should include an account of what it is to know the meanings of its expressions. What will be referred to here as 'translational semantics' is the idea that such an account can and ought to be provided in the form of translations of (or a system for translating) the expressions of the language under description into some chosen metalanguage. It is questionable whether (i) translational semantics is feasible, and if it is, (ii) whether it is useful.

The first of these questions turns on the kind of translation held to be necessary. For many theorists, the chosen metalanguage is one which must provide, inter alia, an exhaustively explicit enumeration of the 'components' or 'features' which collectively comprise the meanings of units of form (e.g. 'words'), together with rules governing the semantic interpretation of combinations of those units (e.g. 'sentences'). Construed in this way, the translationalist's enterprise requires that the meanings of linguistic expressions be determinate; for if they are not, it will be unclear by what criteria a proposed feature-specification, for instance, is to be adjudged correct (i.e. exhaustive, explicit, and in conformity with the facts of usage of the expression concerned). It has been argued, for example by Sampson (1980), that the expressions of natural languages are not in fact semantically determinate. Indeed, meanings could scarcely be other than intrinsically unstable, given the way in which native speakers of a language learn them: "we all spend our time guessing what sets of criterial features would explain the application of given words to given things in the speech we hear around

us (and in the writing we read) while trying to conform our own usage to each other's criteria in order to be understood" (Sampson 1980:48). If this is so, the translationalist's demand for exhaustively explicit and correct feature-specifications will not only be impossible to meet in practice but incoherent in principle, for "it is not clear what it could mean in such a context to talk of a standard of correctness which a given speaker has or has not achieved with respect to his use of a given word" (Sampson 1980:48). Sampson (1980:46) illustrates his point by considering "a typical question of the kind which would have to be given some answer in a [translational --- N.L.] semantic description of English: the question whether possession of a handle is a criterial feature for the application of the word cup to an object". This question may be rephrased in various ways, depending on the descriptive format with which the semanticist is working --- e.g. 'should the feature-specification for cup include the feature [+ HANDLE]?', 'should a semantic description of English contain a rule "from X is a cup infer X has a handle"?', or 'is the sentence cups have handles analytically true?' The question, in whatever form, arises because cup is one of a group of words, including mug, tumbler, beaker, vase and others, whose meanings are similar but not identical, and it is the task of the translational semanticist to determine precisely what set of concepts is summed up in the word cup, and how that set differs from the set summed up in tumbler, beaker, etc. But it is far from clear that such questions are answerable.

Less stringent demands than these may be made on the chosen metalanguage. A translational semantic account of a natural language might, for instance, be held to be accomplished by translating all of its expressions into another natural language. This interpretation would circumvent Sampson's objection, in as much as translation from one natural language to another is clearly possible. But even if, by allowing another natural language to stand as metalanguage to the language under description, we guarantee the feasibility of translational semantics, there remains the question of its adequacy as an account of 'semantic knowledge'.

This question has been voiced by, e.g. Evans and McDowell (1976:x). The problem is that, if to know the meaning of an expression is merely to know its translation into a metalanguage, the account of semantic know-

ledge offered encompasses the possibility that someone might know all the translational equivalences between the two languages who yet does not, in any serious sense, know the meaning of any expression in either of them. Take, by way of illustration, a monoglot speaker of Afrikaans who has before him Harrap's French-English, English-French dictionary as his sole source of knowledge of both English and French. According to the translational theory of meaning the fact that he has available to him, for every word of English, its translational equivalent in French (for purposes of the example the metalanguage in which the meanings of English expressions are to be explicated) implies that he knows the meanings of all the words of English. And it is certainly undeniable that if asked what the English word dog means, he can reply 'chien', and if asked what queen means, he can answer 'reine', and so on; but if all he knows about chien and reine turns out to be that they mean 'dog' and 'queen' respectively, it is unclear that it would be useful to ascribe to him semantic knowledge of either English or French.

Objections to translational semantics along both of these lines are far from novel. One might therefore have expected a new, revised edition of a popular textbook on the subject to have devoted considerable space to an attempt to dispose of them. The second edition of Geoffrey Leech's *Semantics* (Leech 1981) is, in this respect, unsatisfactory;¹⁾ and the remarks that follow are offered in the hope that they will provide meat that a third edition will see fit to get its teeth into.

2 What meaning is (not)

According to Leech (1981:x), "Linguistics ... has brought to the subject of semantics a certain degree of analytic rigour combined with a view of the study of meaning as an integrated component of the total theory of how language works". The 'total theory of how language works' that Leech has in mind runs roughly as follows. Language is envisaged primarily as something one knows rather than something one does, and communication by means of language is a matter of implementing that knowledge. Speaking and writing are, of course, activities, but acts of speaking or writing or of understanding the speech and writing of others are not

themselves the object of linguistic study. That object is, rather, the (unconscious) knowledge that permits these activities to take place.

"A ... principle underlying many present-day approaches to semantics is seeing the task of language study as the explication of the LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE of the native speaker of a language; that is, the provision of rules and structures which specify the mental apparatus a person must possess if he is to 'know' a given language" (p. 5).

What one is taken to have unconscious knowledge of is not 'language' in general but the one or more languages of which one is a native speaker. Languages, according to the theory, are systems of correspondences between two levels of structure, one of which is called 'form', and the other of which is called 'meaning'. The native speaker of a language is held to know the set of forms comprised by that language, and the set of meanings that correspond to them. If confronted with the utterance 'I would like a nice juicy apple' he understands it (so the theory runs) in virtue of knowing the meanings of the forms a, apple, I, juicy, like, nice, would, and the meaning of the composite form consisting of a sequence of those forms in the order I, would, like, a, nice, juicy and apple.²⁾ Conversely, if a native speaker of English wishes to express a desire for a nice juicy apple, he knows that one way of doing so is to utter that sequence of forms.³⁾

Communication between speakers A and B of a language is seen as being possible because A and B both have access to the system of correspondences between forms and meanings which constitutes the language. To communicate with B, A encodes his meanings in the appropriate forms. To understand A, B matches up the forms which he hears A utter with the corresponding meanings.

What exactly is a meaning? This is not a question that bothers Leech unduly:

we might say that the whole point of setting up a theory of semantics is to provide a 'definition' of meaning --- that is, a systematic account of the nature of meaning. To demand a definition of meaning before we started discussing the subject would simply be to insist on treating certain other concepts, e.g. stimulus and response, as in some sense more

basic and more important. A physicist does not have to define notions like 'time', 'heat', 'colour', 'atom', before he starts investigating their properties. Rather, definitions, if they are needed, emerge from the study itself (p. 4).

Nonetheless, Leech is prepared to tell us a certain amount about what meanings are not. The meaning of apple is not, for instance, the sum total of the true statements that can be made about apples. The idea that the meaning of a referring expression is the 'scientific' definition of what it refers to was put forward by Bloomfield (1955:139):

We can define the meaning of a speech-form accurately when this meaning has to do with some matter of which we possess scientific knowledge. We can define the names of minerals, for example, in terms of chemistry and mineralogy, as when we say that the ordinary meaning of the English word salt is 'sodium chloride (NaCl)', and we can define the names of plants and animals by means of technical terms of botany and zoology, but we have no precise way of defining terms like love or hate, which concern situations that have not been accurately classified, and these latter are in the great majority.

Bloomfield's (1955:140) conclusion was that "the statement of meaning is therefore the weak point in language study, and will remain so until human knowledge advances very far beyond its present state". Bloomfield's conception of meaning clearly makes its study impossible in practice, since in order to state the meanings of the words of a language we need first to know everything there is to be known about the things referred to by those words. Looked at from the point of view of the speaker, the claim is that nobody knows the meaning of, for example, salt, unless he knows that salt is sodium chloride. But knowing that salt is sodium chloride has nothing to do, in most circumstances, with whether or not one can use the word to communicate successfully with other speakers of English. Bloomfield's position implies that no speaker of a language knows the meanings of most of the expressions he uses. Moreover, Leech points out that Bloomfield's method of determining meanings leads to an infinite regression. To say that salt means 'sodium chloride' is to invite the question "what then do sodium and chloride mean?". The answers will consist of words,

each of which will in turn require definition in terms of further words, and so on. In supposing that the meaning of a linguistic expression could be explained in terms of facts about the objects it referred to, Bloomfield was vainly attempting to locate meaning 'outside language', whereas according to Leech

one of the keynotes of a modern linguistic approach to semantics is that there is no escape from language: an equation such as cent = hundredth of a dollar or salt = NaCl is not a matching of a linguistic sign with something outside language; it is a correspondence between linguistic expressions, supposedly having 'the same meaning'. The search for an explanation of linguistic phenomena in terms of what is not language is as vain as the search for an exit from a room which has no doors or windows, for the word 'explanation' itself implies a statement in language. Our remedy, then, is to be content with exploring what we have inside the room: to study relations within language ... (p. 5).

Some of the relations within language that Leech argues to be the proper subject-matter of semantics are: (i) synonymy (the relation between the meanings of 'I am an orphan' and 'I am a child and have no father or mother'), (ii) paraphrase ('the defects of the plan were obvious' and 'the demerits of the scheme were evident'), (iii) entailment ('the earth goes round the sun' and 'the earth moves'), (iv) presupposition ('John's son is called Marcus' and 'John has a son'), (v) inconsistency ('the earth goes round the sun' and 'the earth is stationary'). Synonymy is 'sameness of meaning'. This is taken to mean that two utterances⁴⁾ X and Y are synonymous if they have the same truth-value. If Y is synonymous with X, then if X is true, Y is true, and vice-versa, and if X is false, Y is false, and vice-versa. Similar definitions can be stated for the other semantic relations mentioned, according to Leech (p. 74). The important point is that knowledge of these relations is taken to be part of the tacit knowledge of speakers of a language. A speaker of English who assents to the truth of the earth goes round the sun, for example, is committed to assenting to the truth of the earth moves. Part of his knowledge of English semantics is the knowledge that the relation of entailment holds between those two sentences. The task of the semanticist is to determine and describe the knowledge of this sort that speakers have.

This task requires that two important distinctions be drawn. The first is between 'linguistic knowledge' on the one hand, and 'factual' or 'real-world knowledge' on the other.

The speaker who knows that I am an orphan is synonymous with I am a child and have no father or mother knows it in virtue of knowing the meanings of the words concerned. The truth of I am an orphan, given the truth of I am a child and have no father or mother follows from the meaning of orphan. One does not need to know any facts about particular orphans before being in a position to assent to the synonymy of the two sentences. Leech contrasts this case with what he calls 'factual synonymy' (p. 75). Charlotte lives in Paris, for example, is factually synonymous with Charlotte lives in the capital of France. What gives utterances of these two sentences the same truth value is the fact that Paris happens to be the capital of France. But this is not a fact about the meanings of the English words used to express it so much as a fact about the sociopolitical organisation of that corner of Europe. To know that Paris is the capital of France is to know something about the world. But it is not similarly the case that an orphan 'happens to be' a child with no father or mother. To know that an orphan is a child with no father or mother is to know something about English.

A comparable distinction can be drawn for the other semantic relations mentioned. For example, the relation between it has been raining hard and the ground is wet is the 'factual' counterpart of the relation between the earth goes round the sun and the earth moves. If it has been raining hard, the ground will (probably) be wet. This is a matter of the connection between physical phenomena. If the earth goes round the sun, then the earth moves. This is a matter of the connection between the meaning of moves and the meaning of goes. Semanticists are interested only in relations of this latter type. They are interested in characterising the knowledge someone has because he is a speaker of his language, not the knowledge that he has because he is an intelligent inhabitant of the world.

This distinction can also be brought out with reference to two different kinds of nonsense. The example Leech gives is the difference between my uncle always sleeps standing on one toe and my uncle always sleeps awake (p. 6). The situations referred to by these sentences are both impossible, but they are impossible for different reasons.

The first runs counter to what we know about the postures in which sleep is possible, the second to what we know about the meanings of sleep and awake.

An analogy may be drawn here between the rules of a language and the rules of a game. Events within a football match, for instance, may be impossible (a) because they violate natural laws regarding physical strength of human beings, the inability of footballs to defy ordinary laws of motion (e.g. by moving in the air like boomerangs), etc. Thus a football report that 'the centre-forward scored a goal by heading a ball from his own goal-line' would be disbelieved as physically impossible, while 'the centre-forward scored a goal by punching the ball into his own goal-mouth' would be disbelieved on the grounds that if such a thing happened, the game could not have been football (p. 7).

The second distinction is between 'conceptual' ('literal') and other kinds of meaning. This is rather more difficult to define, and Leech contents himself with letting it emerge by contrast with the other kinds that he distinguishes. For example, 'connotative meaning' "is the communicative value an expression has by virtue of what it refers to, over and above its purely conceptual content" (p. 12). 'Biped', 'possessing a womb', 'experienced in cookery' are all possible connotations of woman. But they are not, in Leech's terms, part of the conceptual meaning of woman: one may be a woman without having any of these three attributes. It emerges, then, that the conceptual meaning of a word has to do with the characteristics a referent of the word *must* have in order to be correctly so designated. In the case of woman, Leech suggests, these characteristics are 'human', 'female' and 'adult'. Nothing can 'literally' be a woman if it lacks any of these. The other qualities that may be associated with woman, and may in some sense be said to be part of the meaning of the word, are to be distinguished from these as lying outside the domain of meaning that the semanticist is primarily interested in.

Another type of meaning that Leech distinguishes is 'social' ('stylistic' in the first edition of the book). "SOCIAL MEANING is that which a piece of language conveys about the social circumstances of its use" (p. 14). These two sentences are stylistically very different: (i) they

chucked a stone at the cops and then did a bunk with the loot and
(ii) after casting a stone at the police they absconded with the money.
These are said to differ in stylistic meaning in that the information conveyed about the social status of the speakers is different in the two cases. But they are nonetheless conceptually synonymous: "their common ground of conceptual meaning is evident in the difficulty anyone would have in assenting to the truth of one of these sentences and denying the truth of the other" (p. 15). Although what is meant in principle by conceptual meaning is fairly clear, Leech concedes that in some cases it will be difficult to tell whether an observable difference in communicational effect between two sentences is to be explained as a difference in conceptual meaning or not. An example is he stuck the key in his pocket (Leech's (1)) and he put the key in his pocket (Leech's (2)) :

We could argue that (1) and (2) are conceptually synonymous, and that the difference between the two is a matter of style (sentence (2) is neutral, while (1) is colloquial and casual). On the other hand, we could maintain that the shift in style is combined with a conceptual difference: that stick in a context such as (1) has a more precise denotation than (2) and could be roughly defined as 'to put carelessly and quickly' ... Often, in fact, the solution to a problem of demarcation is to conclude that quasi-synonyms differ on at least two planes of meaning (p. 21).

Having delimited the focus of the semanticist's interest in meaning, we can now go on to ask exactly what doing semantics consists in. Producing a semantic description of, for example, English, involves (a) eliciting and (b) characterising the knowledge of meanings and relations between meanings that a speaker has as a result of being a speaker of English.

Eliciting this knowledge depends on conducting empirical tests. One example that Leech gives is a test of knowledge of the relation of entailment (pp. 81-2). Informants are presented with two sentences X and Y and are instructed as follows:

Assuming X is true, judge whether Y is true or not.
If you think Y must be true, write 'YES'.
If you think Y cannot be true, write 'NO'.
If you think Y may or may not be true, write 'YES/NO'.
If you don't know which answer to give, write '?'.

For the case where X was someone killed the Madrid chief of police last night and Y was the Madrid chief of police died last night, the responses were as follows: 'YES' 96%, 'NO' 0%, 'YES/NO' 3%, '?' 1%. The hypothesis that speakers of English know that there is an entailment relation between X and Y in this case was decisively confirmed.

Characterising the knowledge established by tests of this kind is a matter of making it explicit by means of a formal notation. The conceptual meaning of woman is said to be 'adult human female'. Or, to put it more formally, [+HUMAN, -MALE, +ADULT] (or, equivalently, [+HUMAN, +FEMALE, +ADULT]). These are said to be the 'features' or 'components' of the meanings of the words. All words consist semantically of combinations of features. It is sometimes claimed that there is a universal set of semantic features: the differences between individual languages being a matter of differences between the particular combinations of features which they represent as words.

One purpose of semantic feature analysis is to provide a formal characterisation of the various meaning-relations. For example, there are roses in his garden entails there are flowers in his garden. In terms of semantic features, this is because the specification for rose comprises all the features of flower, plus extra ones. In general, X entails Y if the semantic features of Y are a subset of the features of X. The feature specification for human is, presumably, [+HUMAN], for child [+HUMAN -ADULT], for boy [+HUMAN, -ADULT, -FEMALE]. The features of human are a subset of the features of child and boy. The features of child are a subset of the features of boy. Therefore we expect there is a boy in the garden to entail both there is a child in the garden and there is a human in the garden, there is a child in the garden to entail there is a human in the garden but not there is a boy in the garden, and so on. These are predictions which might be subjected to the kind of test with native-speaker informants illustrated above. What we are talking about here is primarily the meanings of individual words. The meaning of larger linguistic units, such as the sentence, bears a complex relation to the meanings of the words which compose them. The words of which the dog bit the man consists are the same as those of which the man bit the dog consists, but the two sentences differ in meaning. A large part of Leech's book is concerned with how sentence-meanings are to be related to word-meanings.

3 The role of context in linguistic communication

Leech's initial failure to say just what a meaning is supposed to be is a key to most of the problems of this approach to semantics. It is taken as axiomatic that meanings are attributes of linguistic expressions considered in the abstract, that they are 'things' that expressions 'have', and that knowing in advance which expressions have which meanings is vital for communication. The theory implicit here is that we communicate in virtue of knowing meanings. But consideration of one's activity as a language-user fails to support this. Many speakers of English, one may hazard, do not know the word outwith. But many of these ignoramuses will, surprisingly, have no difficulty in understanding utterances like the following: 'Scottish candidates should report direct to the commissioner in Glasgow. Candidates from outwith Scotland should write in the first instance'. Clearly, anyone previously unacquainted with the word outwith who nonetheless understands this utterance does not do so in virtue of prior knowledge of its meaning. On the contrary, it is in virtue of understanding the utterance in which it figures that he learns its meaning. This latter account of the relation between meaning and understanding seems to accord with how in practice we learn a new word. We hear it uttered, we deduce from the context what it must mean, and we test the correctness of that deduction by using it with that meaning ourselves. In so far as we thereby achieve our communicational purpose (that is, so long as the response is not, for instance, a blank stare), we count ourselves as having learned a new word. In practice it is rare for recourse to be had to a dictionary. And yet, according to Leech, knowing the meaning of a word is a prerequisite for its successful use in communication.

Conversely, it is by no means the case that being a native speaker of a language guarantees the ability to understand utterances in it. Consider the following:

When dummy went down, I realised that 6S would make if suits broke well and the diamond honours were favourably placed. I therefore decided to assume that twelve tricks were not readily available, hoping thereby to beat all the pairs going down in slam contracts and to make more tricks than those who had lingered in game. I won the opening heart lead in

dummy, drew trumps in two rounds and cashed the ace of clubs. I then ruffed a heart in the closed hand, paving the way for an elimination, and cashed the king of clubs, discarding a diamond from dummy. When the ten of clubs appeared from East, I did not need to look any further for twelve tricks; I ran the jack of clubs, throwing another diamond from dummy, and subsequently discarded a third diamond on the established nine of clubs. I was then able to ruff two diamonds in dummy, thereby collecting twelve tricks by way of five spade tricks and two ruffs, one heart, one diamond and three clubs (Markus 1982).

One imagines that many speakers of English will fail to make much of this. And yet the semantic theorist would be hard pressed to argue that this is because it is not English. It is clearly English, and yet speakers of English may have difficulty in understanding it. What is the source of the difficulty? It is not, for the most part, the obscurity of the vocabulary. Apart from ruff, dummy, slam contract and a few others, few of the words in the passage are in themselves obscure to anyone with at least a slight acquaintance with the practice of card-playing. And, apart from the occasional oddity (when dummy went down, those who had lingered in game, where common nouns are used without an article, as though they were proper names), the syntax is quite straightforward too. Nor does the problem arise from the fact that the words are used metaphorically or in some other non-literal way: what we have here is a perfectly sober and prosaically literal account of a game of bridge. The conclusion must be that those who find it incomprehensible do so because of their lack of familiarity, not with the English language, but with bridge.

This conclusion has an important bearing on the distinction between 'knowledge of language' and 'knowledge of the world' on which, we are told, a viable practice of semantics depends. Lack of the relevant 'real-world' knowledge may hinder understanding of the linguistic expressions used to describe that piece of the world. But the theorist's position must presumably be that although we understand the *language* of the passage as such, because we are native speakers of the language of which it is a sample, where we fall down is in our grasp of the situation being described. But this seems to be a distinction without a difference.

This point is confirmed if we look more closely at Leech's illustration of the distinction between knowledge of language and knowledge of the

world. My uncle always sleeps standing on one toe is said to be factually, rather than linguistically (or contingently, rather than necessarily) absurd. It just happens to be the case that human beings cannot sleep in that posture. But if the world had been ordered differently they might have been able to, and if they were, there would be nothing absurd about such a sentence. Whereas no conceivable reordering of the world could eliminate the absurdity of my uncle always sleeps awake, for if my uncle is asleep then, by definition, he is not awake, and if he is awake, then he is not asleep. But there is no very obvious reason why these explanations of the two kinds of absurdity should not be transposed. Instead of saying that it is the nature of standing on one toe that makes talk of sleeping in that position absurd, why should we not locate the absurdity in the conjunction of the meanings of the expressions sleeps and standing on one toe? Conversely, it might be argued that what makes sleeping awake inconceivable is not the incompatibility of the meanings of sleep and awake, but the incompatibility of the states of consciousness referred to by those words. Our understanding of sleep and wakefulness is such that we have no (non-absurd) use for sentences about creatures sleeping awake. But it might have been the case that there were animals which exhibit a state of consciousness that bears some of the characteristics of both. If so, talk of them sleeping awake might make perfectly good sense. The non-existence of such creatures, if it is a fact, is as much a fact about 'the world' as is the non-existence of uncles who sleep standing on one toe.

To put Leech's point another way, it follows from the conceptual meaning of sleep that to say of someone that he sleeps awake is contradictory. But to put the point in this way is to raise the question of how the 'conceptual meaning' of a word is determined. One possible answer is to say that the conceptual meaning of, for instance, sleep, is determined by such judgements on the part of native speakers of English as that to talk of sleeping awake is not just absurd but contradictory. But (granted that native speakers would make such a judgement) how do they come to do so? The only answer implied by theorists like Leech is: because they have assimilated the form-meaning connection in the case of the word sleep. How can we break out of this circle?

It is relevant at this point to observe that semanticists' statements as to the conceptual meanings of linguistic expressions are not for the most part arrived at in practice by empirical investigation, nor are they particularly well supported by observation. Leech's book is full of confident assertions as to the meanings and relations between the meanings of English words and sentences. What, for example, is the basis for the claim that the semantic features which make up the conceptual meaning of woman are [+HUMAN, +ADULT, +FEMALE]? It is, of course, clear that this judgement does not arise in any very obvious way from mere consideration of how the word is in fact used. 'My father is a bit of an old woman' is not, in the appropriate circumstances, an anomalous utterance, nor does it imply a sex-change operation. In the conversation

- Found anything?
- Yes, can't say more.
- Just one thing, Chief — man or woman?
- Woman. (Williams 1967:320)

the word woman refers to the recently exhumed corpse of a ten-year-old child. 'The woman underwent oophorectomy last year' seems an unexceptionably literal way of expressing oneself, and yet there is room for wondering whether it should not in fact be held to be a contradiction, given that woman includes the feature specification [+FEMALE]. And so on. The point here is not that cases of this sort cannot be explained away with reference to deviations of one kind or another from the literal meaning [+HUMAN, +ADULT, +FEMALE]. The point is that it is not immediately clear where the idea comes from in the first place that cases where the meaning of the word woman can be unequivocally accounted for with reference to the bundle of features [+HUMAN, +ADULT, +FEMALE] are the norm in terms of which others are to be explained as deviations. One likely source is the dictionary. And, sure enough, the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) gives as the first meaning of woman 'adult female human being'. How do the compilers of the OED come by that definition? By a procedure identical, in one respect, to that used by anyone who had not previously encountered the word outwith who nonetheless understood the quoted utterance containing it. Namely, by deducing from the context the most plausible interpretation to be assigned to it. But there is

another respect in which the procedures are different. For the dictionary-compiler deduces his definition of a given word from a very large number of examples. The conclusion that the first, primary or literal meaning of woman is 'adult female human being' is a sort of summary of what is common to the majority of instances of its use in the data on which the dictionary is based. A dictionary definition is thus a retrospective analysis of what speakers have meant by a given word in the past. As such it has a number of uses. It may, for instance, be an important piece of information for someone learning the language as a foreigner. But rarely does it play any role in the use of a word, on a particular occasion, by a native speaker. For that purpose a dictionary definition is usually neither necessary or sufficient. I cannot recall ever having looked up the definition of definition in a dictionary, and indeed have only the haziest idea of what its definition might be. But this is no hindrance to my use of the word in, for example, the last sentence but one, or to my understanding of it when used by others. Conversely, no English dictionary known to me offers the information that there may be occasions when it is appropriate to refer to the body of a dead child as a 'woman'.

If the dictionary definition of a word normally plays no role in its use by native speakers, it follows that it likewise plays no role in a theoretical explanation of what is involved in the use of a word by a native speaker. But Leech's theory has it that prior knowledge of the 'conceptual meaning' (that is, the dictionary definition) of words is what makes communication by use of language possible. In the course of discussing the difference between conceptual and connotative meaning, Leech says that "It can be *assumed, as a principle without which communication through that language would not be possible* that on the whole [speakers of a language --- N.L.] share the same conceptual framework ..." (p. 13, emphasis added). How communication through a language is possible is an empirical question which has yet to be answered. By merely presupposing an answer, Leechian semantics merely makes it more difficult to see that it is a question that even needs to be asked.

However, the Leechian answer is one which the theorist finds it hard in practice to uphold consistently. Communication between speakers of a

language supposedly depends on their being masters of one and the same set of correspondences between forms and meanings. Now this may provide an acceptable account of the working of certain very simple semiotic systems. For example, traffic lights. It is quite plausible to suggest that what makes communication possible between the operator of a set of traffic lights and the road-using recipients of his messages is shared knowledge of the form-meaning correspondences associated with the various permissible combinations of lights. But this is because the set of messages communicable by the system is finite and fixed. One cannot use the system to send messages other than those laid down in advance by the Highway Code. The combination of red and green lights together, for example, is simply uninterpretable. In contrast

the semantic system [of a natural language --- N.L.] is continually being extended and revised. In a language like English, new concepts are introduced in large numbers day by day and week by week, and in very little time (owing to modern mass communications) becomes familiar to many people. These new concepts are eventually not felt to be strange, but are fully assimilated into the language and so become part of standard mental equipment (p. 30).

The trouble with Leech's explanation of linguistic communication is that it fails to offer any account of how this process can come about. If a speaker's understanding of a new word depends on his already knowing its meaning, it is hard to see how it is ever possible to communicate by using a new word, or an old word with a new meaning.

What is lacking here is due recognition of the role of context in linguistic communication. Not that Leech has nothing at all to say about context. He is aware that the meaning of an expression is somehow connected with the context in which it is used, and illustrates this point with reference to the different meanings of the phrase put on, in shall I put X on?, depending on whether X is, for example, the portable radio, the sweater, or the lump of wood (p. 67). One might suppose that the conclusion must be that the meaning of put on (granted that it makes sense to talk of a unitary expression put on, with a significance that varies according to context, rather than of (at least) three distinct expressions with different meanings, that happen to share the same

form) is a summary of what is common to its meaning in the different situations in which it occurs. But just this is the conclusion that Leech rejects: "Instead of seeing total meaning as an aggregate derived from context, we see the contextual meanings as dependent on a previously established set of potential meanings" (p. 68). In other words, a meaning for put on is somehow first established in the abstract, and its meaning in a particular context (e.g. in some given utterance of put the sweater on) is derived in the light of this abstract meaning. But, outside dictionaries and other works of linguistics, the expressions of a language simply never occur 'in the abstract'. Language never manifests itself but in a context.

The notion that there are abstract, decontextualised expressions, and that it makes sense to talk about their meanings, is of course crucial to this approach to semantics. It is implicit in the idea that the semanticist "is interested in studying the communication system itself, rather than what use or misuse is made of it" (p. 2). However, the contrary conviction that there is *no* 'communication system' as such over and above the use or misuse that is made of it is reinforced by closer consideration of some of the statements Leech makes about English.

Part of a speaker's semantic knowledge is held to be knowledge of when the relation called 'paraphrase' holds between different sentences. Paraphrase, we are told, is "roughly, 'sameness of meaning'" (p. 4). Leech gives, as an example of a pair of English sentences so related, the defects of the plan were obvious and the demerits of the scheme were evident.

Now the first point that calls for comment here is that defect does not necessarily mean 'demerit'. One cannot readily substitute demerit for defect in a sentence like the defects of his teeth were obvious. Conversely, a demerit is not *ipso facto* a defect. A scheme for disposing of stray dogs by gassing them may have its demerits, but it is not on that account necessarily defective. (On the contrary, it may be highly successful.) Similarly, a plan is not always a scheme. One cannot paraphrase the defects of the plan were obvious by the demerits of the scheme were evident where the plan in question happens to be a plan of the sort otherwise referred to as a large-scale street map. Comparable

points apply to other statements as to the meaning-relations holding between certain sentences that are scattered through Leech's book. Doctors can read, we are informed (p. 261), is synonymous with doctors are literate. But not in the case where the utterance 'doctors can read' is followed by 'the others must stand in the corner with their hands on their heads'. They chucked a stone at the cops and then did a bunk with the loot is supposedly synonymous with after casting a stone at the police, they absconded with the money (p. 15). But not if the 'loot' in question consists of jewellery and share certificates. In all such cases, the meaning-relation held to be exemplified only holds provided certain assumptions are made about the context of utterance. What saying that the demerits of the scheme were evident is a paraphrase of the defects of the plan were obvious boils down to is merely that it is possible to envisage circumstances in which both might be uttered with reference to the same situation, and with roughly the same communicational effect. But if this is all that being a paraphrase amounts to, we could equally well count as paraphrases of the defects of the plan were obvious such forms of words as it was clear why it couldn't be done or the proposal would, without question, have led to a complete cock-up or nobody thought the idea had much chance of working or when he'd finished outlining it, they all said "don't be daft". But if these are not paraphrases of the defects of the plan were obvious, Leech has failed to tell us why not. And if we are in doubt how to tell whether X and Y are paraphrases, it is quite unclear what it means to insist that knowledge of when the paraphrase-relation holds is part of the native speaker's knowledge of the semantics of his language.

One possible unstated criterion is that the words of a would-be paraphrase of X should match those of X fairly closely. But how closely? Demerit may, sometimes, for some speakers, serve as a rough equivalent of defect. At other times, or for other speakers, it will not. What emerges here is that paraphrase, *pace* Leech, is not a relation that holds between forms of words considered in the abstract, irrespective of particular speakers and particular occasions of speech.

This is a point that Leech would perhaps claim to have circumvented by stressing the importance of his semantic testing procedures. Ultimately,

he would say that whether or not the demerits of the scheme were evident is a paraphrase of the defects of the plan were obvious is a matter to be decided by eliciting the judgements of native informants. Let us look again at the example of such a test already mentioned. Ninety-six per cent of respondents considered that, if someone killed the Madrid chief of police last night is true, then the Madrid chief of police died last night must also be true. Thus, so Leech would argue, the entailment relation between these two sentences has been established as a matter of objective fact. Furthermore, the informants' readiness to provide an unequivocal answer to the question indicates that it does make sense to treat decontextualised sentences as having meaning in the abstract.

Let us consider these claims. First of all, it must be pointed out that ninety-six per cent of Leech's informants were simply wrong, at least on one interpretation of the semantic relation between kill and die. They overlooked the possibility that the police chief was killed by the administration of a slow-acting poison, in which case he might not have died on the night he was killed. Secondly, it is simply not true that the informants in such an exercise are being presented with decontextualised language, for there is no such thing as decontextualised language. The context here is the language-game of being called upon to answer questions about the meaning-relations between particular forms of words. And like any other language-game, this one has its own particular rules. One of the unstated rules here is that one must take the two sentences as referring to one and the same event. For, of course, it is nonsense to suppose that any sentence, as such, entails any other. Everything depends on a tacit contextualisation whereby they are taken as having a particular communicational force.

A slow-acting poison may cause death some time after its ingestion. But there is room for disagreement among speakers of English as to whether it is legitimate to count the victim of such a poison as having been killed at the moment of administration, or at some later time --- for instance, the time of death. The possibility of disagreement on such a matter points to a further problem with Leechian semantics. We are invited to believe in the existence of a monolithic, determinate structure of correspondences between forms and meanings, called 'English',

which, because it is the common possession of 'speakers of English', allows them to communicate with one another. And yet, on consideration, it seems unlikely that all those people we would want to count as speakers of English have exactly the same knowledge of exactly the same correspondences between forms and meanings. This is not a point that escapes Leech's attention entirely. For instance, he observes that "it is too simple to suggest that all speakers of a particular language speak exactly 'the same language'" (p. 13). Elsewhere (pp. 111, 113) when discussing 'taxonomic oppositions' of meaning between words, he says that

"it must be emphasised here, as before, that the semantic oppositions and their interrelations need not reflect categories of scientific thought: we are concerned with the 'folk taxonomy' or everyday classification of things that is reflected in the ordinary use of language. There are many instances where folk taxonomies involve what a scientist would consider a misclassification: in the past history of English, for example, the word worm has been applied to both worms and snakes, and the word fish has been applied to whales. One of the difficulties of trying to arrive at a folk taxonomy for present-day English is the interference to varying degrees of technical taxonomies (e.g. the biological taxonomy in terms of classes, orders, genera, species, etc.) in the ordinary non-specialist use of language ..."

But pointing out that there is such a difficulty is not a substitute for overcoming it. And unless it can in principle be overcome, Leech's theory is in jeopardy. If you think a whale is a kind of fish, whereas I think it is a mammal, or if Leech thinks a dog is "an animal of the canine species" (p. 84), while everyone else knows, or thinks the knows, that living dogs belong to a number of different species, then in each case the semantic knowledge of the two parties is different. But successful communication, we are told, depends on their semantic knowledge being the same.

It is a mistake to treat 'a language' as an independently identifiable entity that somehow exists in the abstract over and above the communicative acts in which it is manifest. Meanings are not things which expressions, as such, 'have'. If they are things at all, they are things

that utterances have in virtue of their use at particular times in particular places by particular speakers. Communication by means of language is not a matter of making use of a prearranged set of correspondences between forms and meanings, for there is no such prearrangement. Rather, communication is a continuously creative form of social interaction in which the precise role of language will vary according to circumstances.

Suppose I want to offer you a cigarette. One way of doing this is to turn to face you, holding out a packet of cigarettes, and to utter, with an appropriate intonation pattern, the words 'would you like a cigarette, X?', where X is your name. Another and no less effective way would be to make exactly the same bodily gestures, but to omit the verbal utterance entirely. Or, provided the intonation was correct, I could probably get away with accompanying the bodily behaviour with a piece of verbal gibberish, without detriment to my communicational success. But now suppose that, although within earshot of one another, we are in a crowded room, engaged in conversation with different third parties, and, without looking in your direction, producing a packet of cigarettes, or in any other non-verbal way indicating my intention, I say 'would you like a cigarette, X?'. There is a strong possibility that your response would be 'what was that?' or 'were you talking to me?'. That is, the case where, for getting my message across, I rely *exclusively* on the putative shared code of correspondences between forms and meanings is the very one where we are most likely to encounter a communicational hitch. The moral of the story is that language itself may be neither necessary or sufficient for communication, and that any attempt to explicate linguistic meaning that fails to take account of the complex ways in which, in acts of communication, language is integrated with other aspects of behaviour, is likely to be inadequate. As Leech truly observes (p. xi): "theoretical semantics can easily lose contact with practical problems of communication, and so can suffer from a somewhat distorted, etiolated view of the subject it is meant to be studying".

NOTES

1. E.g. the space allocated to a discussion of criticisms of componential analysis in the first (1974) edition (pp. 122-4) is expanded by three hundred per cent in the second (pp. 117-122), but six pages is not, relative to the length of the book, much of an advance on two.
2. Whether this way of putting it corresponds to how knowledge of this sort might be represented in e.g. a generative grammar of English is not at issue here.
3. Of course, non-native speakers, if they are at all proficient, know these things too.
4. It is unclear how much importance Leech attaches to the distinction between (a) sentences and utterances and (b) sentences and propositions. For example, 'my uncle always sleeps standing on one toe' is introduced as an utterance (p. 6), but is then almost immediately referred to as a sentence which for an English-speaker would be "unbelievable because of what he knows about the world we live in". Similarly, in discussing tests of speakers' knowledge of logical relations between propositions, he says: "it might be worth while to ask them 'if sentence X is true, does sentence Y have to be true?'" (p. 81). Leech's failure to respect these distinctions is an important source of the difficulties encountered by his semantic theory; and since he apparently thinks that in practice there is no need to invoke them systematically, in what follows it is assumed, for expository convenience, that the argument will be unaffected if various English forms of words, cited by Leech as either sentences or utterances or propositions, are referred to hereafter as 'sentences' throughout.

REFERENCES

- Bloomfield, L.
1935 Language. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Evans, G. and J. McDowel
1976 Truth and meaning: essays in semantics. Oxford:
 Clarendon Press.
- Leech, G.
1981 Semantics: the study of meaning. Second Edition.
 Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Markus, R.
1982 'Bridge'. The Guardian Weekly, 5 December 1982, p. 23.
- Sampson, G.
1980 Making sense. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Williams, E.
1967 Beyond belief. London: Hamish Hamilton.