IMPERIAL COLLEGE LONDON – PHILOSOPHY OF MIND

Rethinking Thoughts, Languages, and Meaning - What Do They Stand For?

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Background and Motivation

For over four years, I have been attempting to learn German and Japanese with the kind of systematic dedication that ought, by rights, to produce results. I have tried textbooks, vocabulary lists, Duolingo drills, and YouTube tutorials, and the returns have been, to put it charitably, modest. At some point the failure became philosophically interesting. What, exactly, am I trying to do when I learn a word? When I eventually learn that *Angst* means anxiety, or that the Japanese *ma* denotes a kind of meaningful pause, what is that meaning relation? Something seems to be missing from the picture in which a word is simply a label that maps onto a concept, and I just need to memorise the mapping. This essay argues that the missing piece is a philosophical one. Drawing principally on Heidegger's account of being-in-the-world and absorbed coping, I will argue that the traditional representationalist model of meaning, the view that thoughts and words stand for things by virtue of inner representations that *refer* to them, is fundamentally inadequate. Meaning, properly understood, is not a static relation between a symbol and its referent but an *embodied mode of being-towards* a world in which one is already practically engaged. This has consequences not only for the philosophy of language but for cognitive science and artificial intelligence.

The Representationalist Picture and Its Problems

The dominant tradition in the philosophy of mind treats intentionality, the "aboutness" of mental states, as the key to meaning. On Frege's influential account, a linguistic expression has both a *sense* (its mode of presentation) and a *reference* (the object it picks out), with sense mediating our grasp of what a word stands for [1]. The broader representationalist framework treats the mind as a system that manipulates inner symbols whose content is determined by their causal or inferential relations to the world. To understand a word is to possess the correct internal representation and know the rules for deploying it.

This picture generates a notorious difficulty: the *frame problem*. When an agent acts, the world changes, but not every fact changes with every action. A symbol-manipulating system must somehow know which facts are relevant in any new situation and which can be safely ignored, yet there is no finite, context-independent list of relevance rules that could accomplish this, because relevance is always indexed to an open-ended situation [2, pp. 258–262]. The frame problem is not merely a technical inconvenience; it is a symptom of something wrong with the representationalist model itself.

Applied to language learning, the lesson is direct. Treating vocabulary as a mapping to be memorised produces what Dreyfus [3] calls a *reactive agent*: a system whose outputs are a function of its inputs, with no operative sense of what matters in context. One can produce the correct translation on a test and be utterly at a loss when confronted with a native speaker whose words arrive embedded in gesture, tone, and situation.

Heidegger's Alternative: Being-in-the-World and Absorbed Coping

Heidegger's response to the representationalist tradition is not to improve the theory of representation but to contest its starting point. The Cartesian tradition, he argues in *Being and Time*, begins with the wrong picture of what we most fundamentally are: detached, cognising subjects, contemplating a world of objects from the outside. For Heidegger, this picture is an abstraction from a more primordial mode of existence: Dasein's *being-in-the-world* [4, p. 78]. We do not first encounter a neutral world of objects and then attach meanings and purposes to them; we are always already embedded in a web of practical involvements in which things show up as significant from the outset.

The central illustration is the concept of equipment and the *ready-to-hand* (*Zuhandenheit*). When I am writing, the pen in my hand does not present itself to me as an object with the property "useful for writing." It is transparent to my activity, I reach through it, as it were, towards the page. The pen is encountered as a *solicitation to act*, not as a bearer of a semantic label [5, p. 8]. Only when the pen runs dry or breaks does it become visible as an object, at which point I have stepped back from absorbed engagement into a detached, contemplative stance. Heidegger calls this the *present-at-hand* (*Vorhandenheit*), and it is the mode of existence that the representationalist tradition has, disastrously, taken as primary.

The implications for intentionality are radical. Dreyfus argues that "intentional content isn't in the mind, nor in some third realm, nor in the world; it isn't anywhere. It's an embodied way of being-towards" [5, p. 13]. This is a decisive move. If meaning is not stored inside the head, nor attached to objects as intrinsic properties, then the question "what does this symbol stand for?" is already the wrong question. Meaning is constituted in the dynamic, ongoing relationship between an embodied agent and a world it inhabits through practical coping.

Merleau-Ponty [6], whose phenomenology is closely aligned with Heidegger's on this point, describes the body not as an instrument operated by a Cartesian subject, but as "a grouping of lived-through meanings that moves towards its equilibrium" [6, p. 153]. The body is not a vehicle for carrying a mind around; it is itself the locus of a pre-reflective, motor intentionality that orients us towards the world before any explicit representation is formed. This *intentional arc*, the body's perpetual leaning towards its environment, shaped by its history of engagements, is what makes explicit cognition and language use possible in the first place.

The Intentional Arc, Freeman's Neurodynamics, and the Frame Problem Dissolved

The Heideggerian account might seem to float at an uncomfortably abstract level, but Walter Freeman's neurodynamical research provides striking empirical support for it. Freeman studied the olfactory system of rabbits and found that the state of the olfactory bulb at any given moment does not represent a specific odour in a context-independent way; rather, it reflects the entire history of the animal's encounters with odours, the significance those odours have acquired through the rabbit's life in the world [7, p. 208]. The brain is not a lookup table mapping stimuli to stored representations; it is a dynamical system whose attractor landscape has been sculpted by embodied experience.

This finding carries philosophical weight. If neural states are structured by the history of significant encounters, then the frame problem evaporates for embodied creatures. An agent, through coping in particular contexts, learns to attend to what has been relevant and to ignore what has not, not by consulting a list of relevance rules, but because its perceptual and motor systems have been shaped by what has *mattered* in that environment [3]. Relevance is not computed; it is *inhabited*. Meaning is distributed across the agent's history of engagement with a world, sedimented in bodily dispositions rather than stored in a central symbol register.

Language as Equipment: A Heideggerian Account of Meaning

If we take this framework seriously, how should we understand linguistic meaning? I want to suggest that Heidegger's account of equipment extends naturally to language. Words, on this view, are not primarily labels attached to concepts; they are *equipment for coping* within a form of life. To understand a word is not to possess the correct representation but to know how to *go on* with it, to wield it correctly in the contexts in

which it is solicited.

This resonates with Wittgenstein's later dictum that meaning is use: "the meaning of a word is its use in the language" [8, p. 43]. For Wittgenstein, as for Heidegger, meaning cannot be detached from the "language game", the practical, social form of life, within which expressions function. A word torn from its context of use is like a tool torn from its workshop: still identifiable, but in some important sense no longer itself.

Here we can return to the language-learning puzzle with new clarity. The reason that vocabulary drilling produces brittle, context-insensitive competence is that it attempts to acquire the tool while bypassing the form of life in which the tool has its grip. I can memorise that *Angst* means anxiety, but this mapping fails to transmit the distinctive phenomenological colouring of the German term, its resonance with Heidegger's own philosophy, its slightly elevated register, the sense in which a German speaker reaches for it rather than for *Furcht* (fear) in certain situations. Those nuances are not stored in the word; they are *enacted* by a community of speakers embedded in a shared world.

Does Heidegger Over-extend the Practical?

A natural objection at this point is that Heidegger's account, whatever its merits for pre-linguistic, practical coping, cannot adequately explain the *compositional* and *rule-governed* structure of language. Natural languages exhibit systematic compositionality: the meaning of a sentence is a function of the meanings of its parts and the rules for combining them. This is not obviously a matter of absorbed coping. Surely the syntactic rules of German dative constructions cannot themselves be "solicitations"?

This objection has force, but it conflates two levels of analysis. Heidegger's claim is not that grammar is irrelevant, but that the *condition of possibility* for grammar becoming meaningful at all is a prior background of practical, embodied engagement. A grammar rule is not a free-floating logical structure; it is operative only within a form of life in which it has a home. Searle [9] makes a related point in arguing that intentionality requires a "Background" of non-intentional skills and practices without which intentional states could not function [9, pp. 143–153]. Even Searle, who resists Heidegger's more radical conclusions, concedes that the Background cannot itself be fully represented without further background, under threat of regress.

A second objection cuts the other way: if meaning is constituted by embeddedness in a form of life, does this not make cross-linguistic meaning radically resistant to translation? Rather than refuting the account, this vindicates a phenomenological intuition that my failures have repeatedly confirmed. The untranslatability of *Angst*, of the Japanese *ma*, or of the Welsh *hiraeth*, is not a quirk of lexicography but evidence that meaning runs deeper than symbol-mapping. These words are crystallised forms of a particular way of inhabiting the world, and it is that way of inhabiting which defies the dictionary. The appropriate response is immersion, not a better flashcard app.

Implications for Artificial Intelligence

The Heideggerian account raises acute questions for AI. Classical AI proceeded on precisely the representationalist assumptions that Heidegger contests: that intelligence is symbol manipulation over a context-independent knowledge base [2]. The frame problem and the persistent brittleness of classical systems outside constrained domains confirm Dreyfus's phenomenological diagnosis empirically. Situated, Embodied, and Dynamical (SED) approaches represent a broadly Heideggerian alternative, treating agent and environment as a coupled dynamical system whose behaviour emerges from their interaction rather than from stored representations [3].

Contemporary large language models are an instructive test case. They achieve remarkable fluency, but fluency is not coping. It is not obvious that statistical co-occurrence of tokens constitutes the kind of embodied, historically sedimented engagement with a world that Heidegger identifies as the ground of genuine meaning. The Heideggerian framework gives us a principled way of pressing that question, rather than simply marvelling at the fluency and assuming that understanding must follow.

Conclusion

The question with which this essay began, what does “A means B” mean, turns out to conceal a fundamental dispute about the nature of mind, language, and our relationship to the world. The representationalist tradition answers that A stands for B in virtue of an inner symbol that refers to B as its content. Heidegger’s answer is more unsettling and, I have argued, more adequate: meaning is not a relation between symbols and their contents, but an embodied mode of being-towards a world that one already inhabits through practical engagement. Words are tools, not labels; to understand them is to know how to wield them within a form of life, not to possess their correct mapping.

This framework does more than diagnose my language-learning failures, though it does that too with some precision. It reveals that the very aspiration to learn a language through decontextualised symbol-mapping is a category error, an attempt to acquire equipment while bypassing the workshop. One-way tickets to Germany and Japan begin to look philosophically vindicated, if financially inadvisable. More importantly, the Heideggerian account suggests that any theory of mind that begins from the inner/outer distinction, treating the subject as a cognising point confronting a world of objects, will inevitably distort what it is trying to explain. Meaning is not inside the head or out in the world. It is, as Dreyfus [5] puts it, simply *an embodied way of being-towards*.

1 References

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