

Thick Words and Thin Words

Philosophy is perhaps the most sensitive of all disciplines to subtle shades of meaning, ambiguities, and so on, but it surprises me how little we ever think about words themselves. Even in the philosophy of language, where we talk about the meaning relation, we almost never even consider the nature of the entities *doing* the meaning.

When we do think about words, we typically characterize them with an ontological thesis and a semantic thesis. First, we usually think of words as simply physical entities, such as marks on paper, sound waves, or perhaps or sets of these physical entities. I'll call this the *reductive thesis of words*. We use these physical objects to convey meaning, and so we are naturally led to a semantic thesis about how they do so - we establish some conventions for associating words with meanings. Words thus have their meanings contingently; we could have used any word to refer to something other than what it currently refers to; and words can change their meanings or referents. 'Squirrel' refers to the family Sciuridae, but it just as easily could have stood for lobsters. It's just a convention, after all. I call this the contingent-convention thesis, or C-C thesis. These two theses are connected in ways I'll presently discuss. Let's call the conjunction of these theses the theory of thin words.

I think the theory of thin words is wrong. I think that on the contrary, words are abstract objects much like numbers, with a very structured relationship to the sounds and shapes that are their *presentations*. Moreover, I think that such words have their meanings necessarily. I call this the theory of thick words. It's a rather startling view - we couldn't have used this very word, 'Squirrel', to refer to anything but the family Sciuridae. If it had referred to something else, it would have just been a different word. That's not to say we couldn't have used a different word that sounded exactly the same, but then, I'm arguing that words are more than sounds. This view seems to strike most as insane, primarily because of supposed intuitive evidence for the theory of thin words which I just mentioned.

But where does this intuitive evidence come from? The intuitions spring from a common source,

namely, that body of linguistic practices, usages and embedded intuitions which I will refer to as “folk linguistics”. I don't use the term dismissively - I think that folk linguistics is our best source of intuitions about the nature of words. But - and I was genuinely surprised to discover this! - once we focus on folk linguistics, I think it becomes evident that there are in fact very few ordinary uses that provide unambiguous support for thin words. More startlingly, I will argue that the great weight of evidence from folk linguistics implies that words are *not* merely contingently related to their referents. In fact, this evidence appears to show that many words are in fact individuated by their referents. For example, consider our treatment of false cognates (i.e., intuitively distinct words in different languages which share pronunciation and / or spelling). Such words are intuitively individuated by their referents.

What, then, are we to make of the remaining (and rather forceful) folk-linguistic intuitions which support the theory of thin words? We commonly have intuitions such as: We could have meant something else by 'Squirrel', 'Squirrel' can change its meaning over time, and so on. But are these intuitions about words? I think that they're intuitions about objects like shapes, sounds, etc.; and to identify words with these shapes and sounds is to beg the question about the identity of words. Rather than say that one set of usages (and the associated intuitions) is/are “correct”, and the other set is “incorrect”, I hold that ordinary practices commit us to two sorts of words - a thick and a thin word. ‘Word’, then, is *ambiguous* as to which sort of word is meant. Anyway, what I want to do here is offer arguments from folk linguistics against the theory of thin words. The ambiguity thesis, as well as the development of the positive theory of thick words, will have to wait for another day.

A quick note on the relation between the the reductive and contingent-convention theses

In a longer paper, I'd talk more about the theory of thin words. For our purposes, I hope I've made it intuitive enough. It's worth noting, as an aside, that something like this view is implicit in the modern practice of logic. The mechanism of 'truth under an interpretation' implements on the idea that the symbols of L are meaningless entities that have their 'meanings' given to them by various 'interpretation

functions' (which correspond to 'possible linguistic conventions'.) It's also worth pointing out the obvious - that the thin words theory has the benefit of ontological simplicity, as well as supposed intuitive evidence.

The two theses are mutually supporting. If words are just physical things, then it's hard to see how they could have anything but a contingent relation to their meanings. How could any concrete object be *necessarily* connected to a meaning? Conversely, if they aren't physical things - if they're abstracta - then many of the intuitions supporting the C-C thesis evaporate, for those are simply intuitions about the relations of sounds to meaning. This alone does not ensure that they have their meanings essentially. It would be consistent to hold that words are (for example) abstract causal- historical entities whose identity is determined by causal connections to an initial tokening of an orthotype/ phonotype. Such an entity need not have its meaning essentially. This sort of a view - call it the *causal-historical theory of words* - appears similar in many respects to the views held by Ruth Millikan and Mark Richard. I'll conclude the talk with some considerations I think rebut this sort of a picture.

At any rate, I've claimed to have several arguments from folk linguistics against the thin words theory. The full piece is about thirty pages, so I'd like to give just a few of my favorite examples here.

A) Folk-linguistic evidence against the reductive thesis

The following arguments focus on the way we associate physical entities like shapes and sounds with words. The first sorts of arguments show that the possibilities of phenomena like mispronunciation and alternate pronunciation preclude the possibility of the reductive thesis. The second sorts arguments show that our ordinary individuation and identification practices preclude the possibility of the reductive account. Just for kicks, let's adopt some conventions: words in dividers such as |squirrel| refer to thin words, double quotes such as "squirrel" refer to thick words, and single quotes such as 'Squirrel' are ambiguous (as befits my earlier claim).

i) Malapropisms, mispronunciations and misspellings

In ordinary usage, we think of people as sometimes mispronouncing or misspelling a word, while nonetheless still using the original word. For example, as David Kaplan points out, when Tom Brokaw

says ‘a mi-we-un dollars’, he is clearly using the word ‘million’, regardless of his inept pronunciation. When George W. Bush says ‘Nuc-u-lar power’, he is using the word ‘nuclear’. Similar points hold for misspellings. When I write ‘The Indians lived on the great planes’, I am using the word ‘plain’, but misspelling it. I am not using the word ‘plane’ and falsely stating, although I do not realize it, that the Indians lived on large flat geometrical surfaces or airborne vehicles.

Furthermore, we can conceive of almost any phonological or orthographic errors a speaker may commit, and nonetheless still be considered by ordinary speakers to be using that word. Importantly, we may conceive of a word being misspelled so that it shares a shape with another word (as in the plane/ plain example above), and yet is still distinct from that other word. So, again, ordinary usage motivates the claim that a word is more than a phonotype or orthotype (or combination thereof).

There is a related point. The very concept of misspelling - as opposed to malapropism, using the wrong word - implies that a word cannot be identical with its spelling. For if one misspells a word, one must be using that very word, and not some other word. Consider the ‘plane’ example again. How can we say that ‘plain’ was misspelled unless it was the word used in the sentence? If the word in the sentence was in fact ‘plane’, then how could it be misspelled? ‘Plane’ is in fact, after all, spelled [p l a n e]. One might hold that words are not misspelled simpliciter, but rather are somehow misspelled relative to the words one intended to use. But such a treatment would still suppose that the word used was a distinct word from the word intended, and hence was a malapropism rather than a misspelling. A malapropism is the use of an incorrect word in a context, such as stating that ‘we have parakeet flooring’. The user is not misspelling ‘parquet’ but incorrectly using a word used to refer to pet birds. Ordinary usage treats misspelling and malapropism as distinct errors. Sometimes misspellings result in malapropisms, but not always. Of course it is often difficult to determine whether a given mistake is a malapropism or a misspelling, but sometimes it is intuitively clear (such as if our hypothetical rube went on to say something like ‘the floor material is so named for its yellowish wood finish’.)

Similar points may be made about mispronunciation. If a word is a sound, then how is mispronunciation possible? How can one mispronounce a sound? One can, after all, produce the incorrect sound, but that is a different matter entirely.

ii) Alternate pronunciations

Consider the words ‘route’ and ‘rout’. The former refers to a path, the latter means to inflict a severe defeat upon (as in ‘the Roman legions routed the Franks’.) The former word may be pronounced in at least two alternate ways; |root| or |rowt|, respectively. But it is incorrect to say that one |rooted| an enemy (although one might have rooted for an enemy, with a very different meaning!)¹. The alternate pronunciation is unacceptable for ‘rout’. But if there is an acceptable alternate pronunciation for one word which is not acceptable for the other, then the two words cannot be the same. Moreover, common practice would be to treat the spoken words |route| and |root| as being identical - in fact, ordinary speakers would say they are alternate pronunciations of the same word. So a word cannot be associated with a phonotype.

Perhaps, then a word is associated with its spelling and pronunciation, for the above words do differ in spelling. But we can easily extend the above sort of argument. For consider the words ‘bark’ and ‘barque’. The former refers to the outer covering of woody plants, and the latter refers to a square-rigged ship. The latter has an alternate spelling, |barque|. But this is not an acceptable alternative spelling of the former word.

It seems moreover possible to consider similar pairs of words which share spelling and pronunciation, but one has an alternative pronunciation the other lacks. Suppose we began to pronounce the word ‘plane’ (aircraft) with the alternative |planned| or |plan|, but did not accept these alternates for ‘plane’ (flat surface). Or consider the actual pair of words ‘peaked’ and ‘peaked’. The latter word, which means having peaks, has an acceptable (if floridly poetic) pronunciation |peak ED| which the former word (which means wan and pale)². We would surely not say that one and the same word both had and did not have an acceptable alternative pronunciation. So again, we do not ordinarily treat a word as being identified with its orthotype, phonotype, or combination thereof.³

¹ Further field research indicates that Australian English contains a verb ‘root’, with a shockingly vulgar meaning. An Aussie who roots for the home team is doing quite a bit more than an American who roots for the home team!

² Thanks to Michael Zerella for the example of ‘peaked’.

³ One might instead tread words as some sort of disjunctive set of orthotypes and phonotypes, where ‘peaked’ (wan and pale) was identified with {|peaked|(spoken), |peaked|(written)} and ‘peaked’ (having peaks) was associated with {|peaked|(spoken) v |peakED|(spoken), |peaked|(written)}. Still, this leaves

iii) Written and spoken words

Natural languages are used in at least two salient ways - they are spoken and written. The word 'cat' may be inscribed on a piece of paper, as I just have, or it may be spoken aloud. Intuitively, it is one and the same word which is both written and spoken; a folk linguist will say that I just spoke/said/uttered the very same word that I wrote. Moreover, if one is asked what word was previously written, one may respond either by saying the word again or by writing it. It follows that words cannot be associated with an orthotype or a phonotype, because phonotypes are distinct from orthotypes. Intuitively, the spoken or written words are presentations of the word.

Of course, this intuition on its own is not enough to motivate thickness. For it simply shows that a spoken word and a written word intuitively have something in common other than an orthotype or phonotype, something of which the orthotype or phonotype is a manifestation. This need not be an entity which has its meaning necessarily (such as a thick word), although that seems a plausible candidate. Perhaps, in keeping with the thin view, a word is to be identified with an {orthotype, phonotype} pair. But this pair seems wholly unnatural. There are, after all, many such pairs, and only some of them are words or associated with words. {|lobster|(written), |squirrel|(spoken)} is neither a word, nor even associated with one. The pair {|lobster|(written), |lobster|(spoken)} is at least associated with a word. So again, a word cannot be identified with just any such pair. Moreover, there is a reason some pairs are associated with words, and other pairs are not, and this reason does not seem explicable in terms of 'thin' words.

B) Folk-linguistic evidence against the contingent-convention thesis

The arguments in this section fall into three rough types. First, I consider intuitions about the way we identify and individuate words based on their *semantic* properties - specifically, homonyms,

us with a similar problem: any given utterance of |peaked| is an instance of both

⁴ Of course, the written and spoken words of a language need not be related in this way. Perhaps Chinese ideograms are not intuitively the same word any some spoken word, or perhaps Egyptian hieroglyphs are not the same words as any spoken Egyptian words. We shall discuss these cases in chapter 9. For now, the point remains that in many languages, we have a strong intuition that spoken words are identical to certain written words.

cognates and equivocation. Second, I consider practices by which we individuate words based on their *syntactic* qualities. Finally, I consider the practices of word individuation commonly employed by experts, such as linguists and lexicographers.

iv) Homonyms

Natural languages are considered by its speakers (and specifically, by the presumed “masters” of that language, i.e., its teachers) as having homonyms - distinct words that have identical orthotypes and phonotypes. For example, English has the word ‘plane’ and the word ‘plane’; one word means a flat surface, and the other word means an aircraft. Grade school grammar classes instruct quite explicitly that these words, although they sound and are spelled alike, are different words. Moreover, what distinguishes them is, as the example points out, their meaning. It is also worth noting that grammar teachers are sensitive to both distinctions in words and distinctions in sounds - for there is also the category of homophones

The example of homonyms shows clearly that words cannot be thin. But it also seems to show that what makes an occurrence of ‘plane’ an instance of one word rather than another is its meaning. Hence, the meaning is essential to the word.

v) Cognates and false cognates.

In natural languages, it is quite common for distinct languages to share orthotypes, phonotypes, and even ortho-phonotypes (strings of symbols which are both inscribed and pronounced the same way). When these entities share meanings, they are referred to as “cognates”; when they do not share meanings, they are referred to as “false cognates”.

For example, in German, the symbol written as |r o t| and pronounced |r□t| refers to the color redness. The English word with the same pronunciation |□t| and the spelling |r o t e| refers to a mechanical method of learning or memorizing. The English entity and the German entity clearly share the same phonological presentation. But ordinary language users treat these as different words, and intuitively they are distinct words. Thus, a common way of naturally understanding words is

⁵From the Greek, same + onomo, name. Whether this was originally intended to mean that there is one name for two distinct words, or that the two homonyms are actually the same name / word, is unclear to me.

incompatible with treating those words as phonotypes. The same point can be made at a sentential level. The German sentence ‘Empidokles liebt’, which means that Empidocles, a person, loved, shares the same phonotype and pronunciation with the English sentence ‘Empidocles leaped’, which expresses the proposition that Empidocles jumped. But again, intuitively, the sentences are distinct, which entails that sentences are not to be associated with their pronunciations or with a phonotype.

The example of entities in different languages which share both orthotype and phonotype is even more stark. For example, consider ‘si’ in Spanish and ‘si’ in French. The former expresses the affirmative, the latter expresses the conditional (actually the latter has a homonym, but this homonym need not concern us here). The rather strong intuitions of most speakers are that these are, in fact, two distinct words. As a thought experiment, ask yourself how many words French and Spanish share. We do not, for example, answer that the Spanish word for the affirmative is a French word. These words cannot then be identified with their orthotype/phonotype pair. For suppose the words are these phonotype/ orthotype pairs. Then

‘Si’(French) = { |Si|(sound), |Si|(shape) }.

And of course, ‘Si’(Spanish) = { |Si|(sound), |Si|(shape) }.

Thus, ‘Si’(French) = ‘Si’(Spanish), or, in other words, ‘Si’(French) belongs to Spanish.

This directly contradicts the intuition reported above - the intuition that the Spanish word for the affirmative is not a French word.

What intuitively distinguishes these words is that they have different meanings, and this is the intuition most natural language speakers will report. One might object that this conclusion is too hasty, and there are perhaps other features which differentiate ‘si’ (Spanish) and ‘si’(French). The obvious starting point is that they are symbols in different languages, and being in a different language is what makes them different words. But I believe this to be mistaken for several reasons.

First, it seems to miss the point. For the thin words, as shown above, belong to both languages. So a word-in-a-language must not be a thin word.

Second, it requires dismissing the intuitions of folk linguist. After all, the initial claim was that intuitions from “folk linguistics” motivate the identification of words with orthotypes, phonotypes or

⁶ This example is originally due Jerry Fodor

some combination thereof. But folk linguists appear to report not merely that ‘si’(F) and ‘si’(S) are distinct words, but that they are distinct because of their meanings. So intuitions from folk linguists, if taken at face value, support the thickness of words; and if not taken at face value but reinterpreted, then we should feel free to reinterpret other intuitions from folk linguistics - specifically, the intuitions supposedly supporting the

Third, the claim intuitively gets it backwards. Words are not distinct because they belong to different languages, rather, languages are distinct (in part) because they contain different words.

Finally, the claim is incompatible with intuitions about borrowed words. The Dutch language, for example, borrowed the word ‘toast’ from English to mean a piece of toasted bread. But this is not a mere cognate; rather, it is the same word in both Dutch and English. Examples of words English has borrowed are even more abundant. ‘Qua’, for example, is a word that English uses, which it borrowed from Latin; they are one and the same word, presumably because they have a certain sort of intentional, historical connection. The point also holds for borrowed morphemes like ‘In’, as in ‘inflexible’, which English borrowed from Latin to mean the same as ‘not’, just as it does in Latin. It also holds for borrowed idiomatic phrases such as ‘Vis-a-vis’. So being in a different languages cannot be a sufficient condition for words being different.

vi) Linguistics textbooks

Linguists commonly use a theoretical concept similar to that of a word, that is, the concept of a morpheme. A morpheme is the smallest unit of meaning, and words are composed of morphemes. For example:

A single word may be composed of one or more morphemes...a morpheme may be defined as a minimal linguistic sign, a grammatical unit that is an arbitrary union of a sound and a meaning.⁷

It is worth noting that this is not an advanced survey of possible linguistic theories, or a theory put forward as a hypothesis which is to be argued for or against, but a textbook. The claim about the

⁷Fronkin & Rodman, *Introduction to Language*, pp 127-128. See also Saeed, *Semantics*, 1997, pp 56-58, O'Grady "Contemporary Linguistics", p 133, and Lyons, *Linguistic Semantics*, 1995, pp25-27 for similar points.

concept of a morpheme is presented as a claim which a substantial number of linguists agree on 8. And morphemes - the building blocks of the words studied by linguists - are thought of as being a union of a sound (or, presumably, a shape) and a meaning. If a given morpheme had a different meaning than it did, then, it would be a different morpheme than it was. This is analogous to the claim that if a number had a different successor, it would be a different number. But this is just to say that linguists treat the objects of their study - words and morphemes - as being thick.

Recap

So, there you have it. I think I've shown that there are some powerful considerations against thinking that words are orthotypes or phonotypes. Moreover, I think the arguments I've used can be easily extended to just about any sort of physical object (or object-type). So what's left? Words must be some kind of abstract object. Perhaps there's still a reduction possible, say, words are abstracted intentions or conventions. But I rather think they are *sui generis* abstract objects.

Moreover, I think I've shown that words are individuated by their meanings. The meaning is part of the identity of the word. I'd be inclined to say this means that words have their meanings essentially. They at least have their meanings necessarily. That's no longer so shocking, now that we've seen that words are not shapes or sounds, which surely are merely conventionally associated with meanings.

Thus, we have widespread and deeply embedded intuitions that words are, surprisingly enough, thick. The next task is to address the evidence from folk linguistics that putatively *supports* the theory of thin words, but that's another paper!

⁸Notably, a large number of linguists prefer a purely syntactic definition for words or sometimes morphemes, such as “the largest linguistic unit which resists interruption” or “the smallest unit which can be moved around in a sentence without thereby making it ungrammatical” (as discussed by Lyons 25-27) ; this appears motivated by the urge to do linguistics as pure syntax and hence rather theory-driven. Although it appears that most linguists would expect these 3 definitions to converge, the purely syntactic definitions seem violable (‘abso-bleeping-lutely’) and are often thought of as heuristics.

