

## MODALITY, INTENTION AND MEANING

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Modality is the point of view expressed towards the proposition. Proposition describes a certain state of affairs. For instance, in the sentence *Jussi menee kotiin* in Finnish or *John goes home* in English the state of affairs, Jussi's/John's going home, is expressed from an asserting point of view, but the same state of affairs could be considered for instance from a questioning, hoping, ordering or advising viewpoint. (See Kangasniemi 1992.) This same idea can be found in Ludwig Wittgenstein (1972: 23, footnote), who writes:

Imagine a picture representing a boxer in a particular stance. Now, this picture can be used to tell someone how he should stand, should hold himself; or how he should not hold himself; or how a particular man did stand in such-and-such a place; and so on. One might (using the language of chemistry) call this picture a propositional-radical.

The point of view which the speaker or writer adopts is based on his intentions and his knowledge of the world. If the speaker's intention is to receive more information, he makes a question, if he intends to cause a change in the world, he gives an order. We can thus select our point of view freely, insofar as we can choose our intentions freely. Conversely, we cannot normally choose the temporal relation to the state of affairs.

The speaker or writer expresses the nature of his utterance by giving it a certain modal treatment. The modal element of the utterance indicates in which role it is put in the language-game. The hearer or reader gives the utterance the correct interpretation, if he interprets the speaker or writer's intention correctly. Commonly the interpretation succeeds on the basis of the modal items of the utterance, but if the form of the utterance does not give the hearer or reader the required hints, the context or situation usually guides him to the correct interpretation. Only seldom do we need to make

questions to ascertain the nature of other participant's utterances in a conversation.

Even the same grammatically well-formed sentence may have different roles in different contexts and situations, as the speaker or writer's intention gives it a different function. Wittgenstein (1978: 7) offers a fascinating allegory about this:

If I have two friends who have the same name and I write a letter to one of them, where is the difference that I do not write it to the other one? In the contents? But it could suit both. (I have not written the address yet.)

The answer is, of course, that the difference is in Wittgenstein's intention to write the letter specifically to the one or other of his friends.

Wittgenstein (1978: 12, 19 - 22) emphasizes that intention must not, however, be confused with the manifestations of the intention. We may still express our intentions unclearly and ambiguously, but the intention cannot fail. Intention is a mental event.

Imagine - in the Wittgensteinian spirit - a language in which lies were told continually (and orders presented as prohibitions, etc.) and the speakers of which were well aware of this special characteristic of the language-game. If we lend this language Finnish vocabulary and syntax, the sentence *Liisa juo kahvia* (*juo* 'drinks', *kahvia* 'coffee (partitive)') presented in this language should thus be interpreted as a negative statement that Liisa does not drink coffee. What would then distinguish this language from normal languages? Nothing in the surface description of the language. If Gulliver or some other foreigner were to observe this falsehood language, he would learn that the verb-form *juo* is a negated form of the third person singular. Then he would realize that when he wants to change a negative sentence to the affirmative, he has to add an affirmation word *ei* (which indicates negation in Finnish). Following this rule he could write in his note-book that *Liisa ei juo kahvia* is an affirmative sentence that Liisa drinks coffee. But would he now have learnt the real nature of the language and its users' intuitive knowledge of their language? Certainly not. The language would thus differ from normal languages on the basis of the odd intentions which its users have.

It is just the notion of intention that makes the basic difference between linguistic and logical semantics. It is not enough that the same sentence may be put in different roles in the use of natural language, but there may even

be a conflict between hearer's inferences about the speaker's intentions and the literal meanings of the words of the utterance, and then we tend to give more attention to our inferences. It is not so important what one said but what one meant. All this must be taken into consideration in linguistic semantics but is excluded in logical semantics.

As John Lyons (1977: 33) points out, the sender's meaning involves the notion of intention. Correspondingly the receiver's meaning involves inferences about the sender's intention. Two kinds of meaning must so be distinguished: the intentional meaning given by the speaker or writer to his utterance, and the non-intentional, literal meaning of the utterance. This distinction is also considered by Lyons (1977: 1 - 2) when he gives examples about the different uses of the noun MEANING and the verb TO MEAN in English:

- (1) What is the meaning of SESQUIPEDALIAN?
- (2) I did not mean to hurt you
- (3) He never says what he means
- (4) She rarely means what she says
- (5) Life without faith has no meaning
- (6) What do you mean by the word CONCEPT?
- (7) He means well, but he's rather clumsy
- (8) Fame and riches mean nothing to the true scholar
- (9) Dark clouds mean rain
- (10) It was John I meant not Harry.

Lyons (1977: 2) notes that the various meanings of the noun MEANING and the verb TO MEAN illustrated above are distinguishable, not unrelated, but he divides the examples into two groups according to whether the notion of intention is relevant to our understanding of the sentence. This basic distinction comes beautifully clear when the examples are translated into Finnish, in which intentional meaning is commonly expressed with the noun TARKOITUS and the verb TARKOITTA and non-intentional meaning with the noun MERKITYS and the verb MERKITÄ:

- (1') Mikä on sanan SESQUIPEDALIAN **merkitys**?
- (2') En **tarkoittanut** loukata sinua
- (3') Hän ei koskaan sano mitä **tarkoittaa**
- (4') Se nainen **tarkoittaa** harvoin mitä sanoo
- (5') Elämällä ilman uskoa ei ole **merkitystä**

- (6') Mitä sinä **tarkoitat** sanalla KÄSITE?  
 (7') Hän **tarkoittaa** hyvää mutta hän on vähän kömpelö  
 (8') Maine ja rikkaudet eivät **merkitse** mitään oikealle tiedemiehelle  
 (9') Tummat pilvet **merkitsevät** sadetta  
 (10') Jussia minä **tarkoitin** enkä Harria.

In sentences 1, 5, 8 ja 9 it is thus non-intentional and in sentences 2, 3, 4, 6, 7 and 10 the intentional meaning in question (albeit sentence 5 could be translated with either of the verbs, when it would also have a slightly different meaning). However, the Finnish verb TARKOITAA can also refer to non-intentional meanings of the words found in a dictionary, e.g. *Mitä tarkoittaa englannin sana SERENDIPITY?* 'What does the English word SERENDIPITY mean?', but in general the division of the functions of the two Finnish verbs is clear, which can be illustrated also with the sentences *Mitä sinä tarkoitat?* 'What do you mean?' and *Sinä et merkitse minulle mitään* 'You mean nothing to me', in which the verbs are not interchangeable. Much of the theoretical considerations presented in linguistic semantics springs from the very ambiguity of the English words MEANING and TO MEAN.

Intention is also the distinguishing factor between lying and being mistaken. A speaker may utter an untrue sentence because he is either intentionally lying or unintentionally is mistaken. Usually we are not offended in the latter case but we certainly are in the former case. The reason for our offence is not thus in the speaker's or writer's utterance but in his intention.

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