

3

The scope of meaning I: external context

CHAPTER PREVIEW

Linguistic expressions can only occur in particular contexts; as a result, working out what role context plays in the determination of meaning is an important part of semantic analysis. This chapter considers one essential type of context: the **external** or **real-world** context to which linguistic expressions refer.

We begin by discussing an important distinction: the distinction between what a word inherently means, and what it can be *used* to mean in a particular context, showing that this distinction is often not self-evident. We then distinguish the different types of task a hearer must perform to correctly understand a linguistic expression in its context (3.1).

In 3.2 we begin the treatment of external context by considering the relation between **sense** and **reference**, discussing

- ◆ the origins of this distinction in Frege;
- ◆ its applications in linguistics; and
- ◆ the nature of **deictic expressions**, which can be seen as a bridge between language and its surrounding external context.

In 3.3. we discuss, and reject, a possible distinction between knowledge of a word's inherent, linguistic meaning (**dictionary knowledge**) and knowledge of facts about the word's external context (**encyclopaedic knowledge**).

3.1 Meaning and context

For the purposes of deciding what a piece of language means, no utterance can be considered as a self-standing whole: words only exist within particular contexts, and we will not be able to achieve an adequate description of meaning if we don't take these contexts into account. Indeed, one of the main questions which any theory of meaning has to answer concerns the *scope* of an expression's meaning: how much of the total effect of an expression is to be attributed to its meaning, and how much to the context in which it occurs? For example, consider the meaning of the English possessive morpheme (-s) in (1a) and (1b):

- (1) a. *Denise's teacher got burnt.*
b. *Denise's brioche got burnt.*

The possessive morpheme expresses two quite different relationships in each sentence: in (1a) it denotes a relationship like that of the verb *teach* to its object: (1a) means 'the person who teaches Denise got burnt'. In (1b), on the other hand, it denotes a relation of ownership or possession: *Denise's brioche got burnt* means 'the brioche belonging to Denise got burnt'. But does this difference result from a difference in the *meaning* of the possessive case, or is it a product of the context in which it is used? To many linguists, it would seem wrong to claim that the English possessive morpheme -s has two different *meanings* in (1a) and (1b). Instead, these linguists would claim, we should analyse its meaning in abstract terms, as denoting a quite general *relation of dependence* between two nouns, and leave the details of this relation in a given context to be supplied through the application of our real-world knowledge about the things being referred to. We know that people's relationships with teachers are different from their relationships with food. As a result, the possessive case in the context of a word like *teacher* receives a quite different interpretation from the one it has in the context of a word like *brioche*, even though the general, abstract meaning of the possessive - marking an (unspecified) dependence between the two nouns - is the same in each case. The fact that the exact details of this general, unspecified meaning may be vague, and in any case are open to various interpretations, does not detract from the intuition that it is the *same* meaning present in both cases.

In this chapter, we will consider the *external* or *real-world* context to which linguistic expressions refer. Our understanding of expressions' meaning is often closely related to our knowledge of this context. The next chapter discusses the *interpersonal* context of linguistic action in which any utterance is placed. In order to interpret an expression correctly, it would seem that a hearer must perform a number of related tasks which involve these two different types of context. For example, consider someone interested in learning to play golf, who receives the advice *All golfers need to find some good clubs*. In order to understand what the speaker means, the hearer must:

1. Disambiguate the noun *club*, which can mean both 'implement used to hit golf ball' and 'association in charge of a golf course'. Given the context, which interpretation is intended?
2. Assign referents to the noun phrases *all golfers* and *good clubs*: who does the speaker mean by *golfers*? What, for them, is a *good club*?
3. Determine the quantity referred to by *some*: roughly how *many* clubs does the speaker count as *some*, as opposed to *lots*?
4. Realize that the expression is intended as part of the context of advice, and is an *instruction* to find good clubs, not an assertion about a universal obligation falling on all golfers: this realization concerns the illocutionary force of the utterance.
5. As a result of (4), extract the implication that since all golfers need to find some good clubs, the hearer must also try to find some.

QUESTION Is there anything else which the hearer must realize in order to interpret the statement properly? How separate are the tasks in (1)–(5)?

In cases like this, the hearer makes the important interpretative decisions quite automatically. In fact, it is rather artificial even to differentiate the five different elements above: all that is required, you might think, is for the hearer to realize how, holistically, to take the instruction. Nevertheless, each item of the list expresses aspects of utterance interpretation which can be observed separately. The question of the interrelations between these different types of interpretative task will be important throughout this and the next chapter.

QUESTION Describe the decisions the hearer has to make about the interpretation of the following utterances in order to understand the speaker's likely meaning:

Customers are informed that the shop will be closing in fifteen minutes.
Could you pass the chilli sauce?
No one's going to the bar tonight.
I'm sorry to bother you.
What are you doing here?
Will you ever grow up?
I can't believe you called me that.

Semantics is not the only field interested in phenomena like these: the subdiscipline of linguistics called **pragmatics** (Greek *praxis*, 'action'), which concerns the use of language in real contexts, also studies them. Semantics and pragmatics are closely related. Pragmatics cannot study language use without a prior conception of meaning: without knowing what words mean, one cannot decide how speakers modify and manipulate these meanings in actual situations of language use. Similarly, semantics cannot arrive at any description of what words mean without looking at the ways they are used in different contexts. This interrelation between meaning and use means that pragmatics and semantics exist in a close symbiosis.

3.2 External context: sense and reference

Perhaps the most basic type of context is the extralinguistic context of **reference**, which concerns the entities which an expression is *about*. (Following the Austrian philosopher Franz Brentano (1838–1917), the property, shared by thoughts and meanings, of being about things other than themselves – objects in the world, possible states of affairs, etc. – is known as their **intentionality**.)

As discussed in Chapter 1, reference is one of the fundamental concepts of the study of meaning. However, for a long time the distinction was not explicitly drawn between an expression's referent (the object to which it refers) and its sense (its general meaning, abstracted from its use to refer). It was the German logician and philosopher of mathematics Gottlob Frege (1848–1925) who first saw the significance of this distinction. Frege's primary concerns had little to do with language; for much of his career, his main goal was to clarify the logical bases of arithmetic. Between about 1891 and 1906, however, he became interested in questions of meaning, and elaborated the distinction between sense (*Sinn*) and reference (*Bedeutung*) that subsequent philosophy and linguistics have inherited.

3.2.1 The Fregean distinction

Frege had no single term for 'meaning', in the sense of the knowledge needed to understand a word (Dummett 2001: 12). Instead, he distinguished three aspects of a word's total semantic effect:

- its 'force', which covered whether it was a statement or a question (he seems not to have considered other categories like commands);
- its 'tone' or 'colouring', which refers to differences of register and connotation (such as the difference between the verbs *die*, *be deceased*, and *pass away*; Dummett 2001);
- and its sense.

The notions of force and tone are reasonably self-explanatory. But what is sense? In his famous 1892 essay 'On sense and reference' (sometimes translated 'sense and nominatum'), Frege introduced the distinction between sense and reference in order to explain a puzzle about statements of identity like those in the (a) and (b) pairs of (2)–(7) below:

- (2) a. *The morning star is the morning star.*
 b. *The morning star is the evening star.*
- (3) a. *Abou Ammar is Abou Ammar.*
 b. *Abou Ammar is Yasser Arafat.*
- (4) a. *Amber is amber.*
 b. *Amber is fossilized tree resin.*

- (5) a. *The president of the World Chess Federation is the President of the World Chess Federation.*
 b. *The president of the World Chess Federation is the president of the Republic of Kalmykia.*
- (6) a. *The founder of the FBI is the founder of the FBI.*
 b. *The founder of the FBI is the grandson of the King of Westphalia.*
- (7) a. *The Feast of Saint Sylvester is The Feast of Saint Sylvester.*
 b. *The Feast of Saint Sylvester is New Year's Eve.*

If all there is to meaning is simply reference, there should be no difference between each pair of sentences (we are ignoring tone and force, which are not relevant in these examples). This is because in each case both noun phrases have the same referent: the planet Venus in (2), the former president of the Palestinian Authority in (3), amber in (4), the Kalmykian president Kirsan Nikolayevich Ilyumzhinov in (5), Charles Joseph Bonaparte in (6), and December 31 in (7). There is, however, a clear difference: while the (a) sentences are tautologies and uninformative – they don't give us any information – the (b) sentences clearly do tell us something. But if a term's reference is all there is to its meaning, how can this be explained? If meaning is no more than what a term refers to, the two pairs of sentences should not differ at all in their cognitive effect.

Frege's solution to this puzzle was that an expression's reference is not, after all, the only part of its meaning: there is something else, which he called its sense. An expression's sense is the way in which we grasp or understand its referent. It is sense which gives an expression its cognitive value or significance. One way of thinking of an expression's sense is as the *mode of presentation* of its referent: the way in which the referent is presented to our understanding. It is precisely because the noun phrases in the (b) sentences above have different ways of presenting their referents that the phrases are informative. The sense of 'morning star', which must be something like 'star visible in the morning', is clearly apparent from the elements of the expression itself; this is a different mode of presentation of the term's referent, Venus, from the one we see in the 'evening star'.

In other cases, the exact nature of an expression's sense – its mode of presentation to our understanding – may be less obvious: what, for example, is the sense of a proper name like Yasser Arafat or Abou Ammar? The nature of sense is one of the central topics of the philosophy of language. Philosophers like Frege and Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) thought that the sense of a proper name is some information which uniquely distinguishes the referent. The other main theory about the reference of proper names is a causal-historical one, according to which names are linked to their referents by a chain of actual naming events: in the first instance, a referent is given a name, and the name is passed down through the speech community: see Donnellan (1972) and Kripke (1980).

Sense and reference are not on an equal footing in Frege's theory of meaning. For him, sense *determines* reference. It is the sense of an expression which allows us to know what it refers to. For example, if I know what the word *amber* can refer to, this is because I have a conception of its sense which allows me to pick out real examples of amber when I am confronted with them. If the sense of amber is 'fossilized tree resin', then whenever I encounter a piece of fossilized tree resin, I can identify it as a referent of the word *amber* and accordingly call it *amber*. Alternatively, if the sense of amber is 'golden-yellow semiprecious stone', then every time I come across a golden-yellow precious stone I can also identify it as amber. Thus, for Frege it is not just an arbitrary fact that words have the denotations (classes of referent) they do. A word only refers in virtue of its sense. Senses, not referents, form parts of our thoughts. The only access we have to actual referents is via the senses of the words which refer to them, and these senses are the forms (modes of presentation) in which they come before our understanding. Actual amber obviously cannot be embodied physically in our thoughts; instead, in order for us to think about it, it must be presented to our minds in some particular way, and this particular 'mode of presentation' is the sense of the word *amber*. It is consistent with this picture of the relation between sense and reference that some expressions (*square circle*, *six-foot high midget*, etc.) clearly have sense, but lack reference: sense, not reference, is the essential part of meaning (see Chapter 1 for discussion).

It is not just individual expressions which have sense and reference, according to Frege: entire sentences do as well. Sentences, for Frege, are the expressions of thoughts, so the sense of a sentence is the thought it expresses. This is reasonably straightforward. On the other hand, Frege's ideas about a sentence's reference are at first sight fairly surprising: Frege said that the reference of a sentence is the sentence's status as true or false: its truth-value. Thus, a true sentence refers to Truth, and a false sentence refers to Falsity in the same way as proper names like *Tom* refer to particular individuals.

The Fregean doctrine of the reference of sentences is likely to cause considerable bewilderment. Naively, one might have thought either that the notion of reference was simply not relevant to sentences, or that the referent of a sentence would be some sort of situation (for a development of this line of thinking, see Barwise and Perry 1983). In any case, it is not easy to see how a sentence – or, for that matter, anything else – can be said to refer to Truth. There is not enough space here to go into Frege's motivation for his position (see Dummett 2001: 13–14). What it shows, though, is the central place occupied for him by the notion of truth. Truth is the basic notion in Frege's semantic theory, through which both sense and reference are to be explained. To know the sense of a sentence, or to have the thought expressed by the sentence is, for Frege, to know how the sentence could be assigned a value as true or false: to know what the *conditions* are that would make it true or false. These conditions are known as the sentence's **truth conditions**. If I know the meaning of the sentence *Satie subsequently collapsed into a state of extreme introspection and alcoholism*, I know what state the referents of the sentence would have to be in for this

sentence to be true – I know, in other words, the statement's truth conditions, i.e. what the world would be like if this statement were true. And knowing what the world would be like were the statement true then allows me to determine, by looking at the words' referents, whether the world actually is this way, and whether or not the sentence is therefore true. To take another example, knowing the sense of the sentence *Your father wants to recite a poem* involves knowing what the conditions are that would make this sentence true: thus, if you were told that *Your father would like to recite a poem* you would be able to determine whether this was true by finding your father and seeing whether he wanted to recite a poem. It is the fact that you know how to go about determining the truth of a statement that therefore constitutes your knowledge of the statement's sense.

Why did Frege give truth such a central place in his conception of semantics? Kamp and Reyle justify the centrality of truth as follows:

...truth is of the utmost importance to us. This is especially so in the context of *practical reasoning*. When I reason my way towards a plan of action, and then act according to that plan, my action will be prone to fail, or even to lead to disaster, if the factual beliefs underlying my deliberation are false – even if my deliberation cannot be faulted in any other way.

...

Since truth and falsity are of such paramount importance, and since it is in virtue of their meaning that thoughts and utterances can be distinguished into those that are true and those that are false, it is natural to see the world-directed, truth-value determining aspect of meaning as central; and, consequently, to see it as one of the central obligations of a theory of meaning to explain how meaning manifests itself in the determination of truth and falsity.

(Kamp and Reyle 1993: 11)

However, as pointed out by Lyons, there are many occasions in which it is not the truth of a linguistic expression which seems to be the most important factor governing its use:

...successful reference does not depend upon the truth of the description contained in the referring expression. The speaker (and perhaps also the hearer) may mistakenly believe that some person is the postman, when he is in fact the professor of linguistics, and incorrectly, though successfully, refer to him by means of the expression 'the postman'. It is not even necessary that the speaker should believe that the description is true of the referent. He may be ironically employing a description he knows to be false, or diplomatically accepting as correct a false description which his hearer believes to be true of the referent; and there are yet other possibilities.

(Lyons 1977: 181–182)

As we will see at various points in what follows, many linguists reject the elevation of truth as the central notion in semantic analysis (for other limits to the relevance of truth in semantics, see 4.3.1).

Sense and psychology

Before leaving Frege, it is important to emphasize the theoretical status of the concept of sense. Sense should not be identified simply with the pretheoretical term *meaning*; rather, it is a quite specific way of thinking about the cognitive effect of words, which contrasts strongly in a number of ways with the term *meaning*. One aspect of Fregean sense in particular may appear somewhat surprising for people who, like most linguists, are accustomed to thinking about meanings psychologically – as, in other words, private mental entities. One of the cornerstones of Frege’s whole approach to philosophy was the rejection of the interpretation of the meaning of a linguistic expression as a private psychological entity of any sort whatsoever. In his philosophy of mathematics, he similarly rejected any attempt to reduce the meaning of mathematical terms to mental entities. Fregean sense is thus not to be confused with the subjective, individual ideas or mental images which an earlier philosophical tradition derived from Aristotle and Locke, and many people today, think of as constituting the meanings of lexical items. Even though senses are things which we grasp mentally, they are not private ideas or mental images. The sense of an expression is a part of a thought; and thoughts, for Frege, are not subjective entities which vary from one individual to another. Instead, thoughts are *objective but intangible* entities, and it is this objective character which guarantees that people may talk about the same thing. Thus, while we often informally say that two people have different concepts of something (honesty, a good time, etc.), and are inclined to extend this way of thinking to word-meanings, this sort of move is incompatible with the Fregean theory of sense. Senses – objective, shared, non-private modes of presentation – do not differ from one person to another.

3.2.2 The sense/reference distinction and linguistic description

For the purposes of linguistic description, the Fregean theory of sense and reference needs considerable development. There is not room here to discuss anywhere near the full range of questions necessarily raised in any thorough exploration of the place of reference in language. Instead, we can only indicate some of the most important.

3.2.2.1 Reference, speakers and hearers

Sense seems clearly to be a property of linguistic expressions: it is words and sentences which have senses. Even though we grasp senses with our minds, the question of what sense a given expression possesses is not, for Frege, under the speaker’s control (see text box). Reference, however, is quite different. Unlike sense, reference *is* under the speaker’s control. It is not words which refer, but speakers. Searle (1969: 82) gives the following two necessary conditions for accomplishing an act of reference:

1. There must exist one and only one object to which the speaker's utterance of the expression applies.
2. The hearer must be given sufficient means to identify the object from the speaker's utterance of the expression.

Clearly, since the hearer can be given any number of means to identify the intended object, the reference of a term in a particular context depends on the speaker (and also of course, if it is successful, on the hearer), not on the term itself. Codes are perhaps the most obvious example of the fact that it is the speaker, not the expression itself, which refers. A code is a speech-style in which speaker and hearer have agreed to reassign conventional referents (and senses). There are many others, however. In Warlpiri, for example, a particular style of speech called Jiliwirri, used by men during initiation ceremonies, replaces the conventional referents of words with their antonyms (opposites) (Hale 1971). For example, to express the idea 'I am sitting on the ground' in Jiliwirri, the Warlpiri sentence 'Someone else is standing in the sky' is used; similarly, the sentence 'I am short' conveys in Jiliwirri the idea 'you are tall':

- (8) *kari ka nguru-ngka kari-mi*
 other AUX sky-LOC stand-NONPAST
 'Someone else is standing in the sky' (ordinary Warlpiri)
 'I am sitting on the ground' (Jiliwirri) (Hale 1971: 473 [reglossed])
- (9) *ngaju-ma rdangkarlpa*
 I-1S short
 'I am short' (ordinary Warlpiri)
 'You are tall' (Jiliwirri) (Hale 1971: 473 [reglossed])

One might, of course, say that in this sort of situation it is also the words' senses which have changed. Under that description, Jiliwirri would constitute a separate language with its own repertoire of senses: a language which happened to have a very close relation to standard Warlpiri in phonology, morpho syntax and in much of the vocabulary, but in which certain crucial semantic differences existed. Another example of the variability of reference may often be found in people's kitchens. Imagine a kitchen in which rubbish was placed in a plastic bag hanging on hooks behind the door of a cupboard under the sink. We can easily imagine that this might be referred to as *the bin*, even though the *sense* of the noun *bin* is in no way simply that of a plastic bag. (Of course, if the sense of *bin* is 'receptacle of any kind for rubbish', then *bin* will be being used here in a way compatible with its sense.)

The variability of reference is even more deep-seated in language than these examples suggest. If we reflect on real discourse, which along with 'literal' uses of languages also contains metaphors, ironical statements, exaggerations and many other types of non-standard reference, to say nothing of simple mistakes, it will soon become obvious that the referential scope of words is extremely large – that, given the right conditions, any word can be used to refer to *any* referent. This poses a considerable challenge

to the theory of sense. For if a word's reference is determined by its sense, then the range of reference that any word may have is extremely wide – in fact, indefinite. As a result, the characterization of sense will have to be broad enough to accommodate all the referential possibilities.

If a given word can refer to any referent, we need to distinguish its typical, expected referents from its atypical, unexpected ones. We take this problem up in Chapter 7. More importantly, we need to distinguish between successful and correct acts of reference. If an act of reference is successful, it succeeds in identifying the referent to the hearer. If it is correct, it refers to the referent in a way which conforms to an assumed standard. Thus, to take up the example of the bin, if I say *the bin is under the sink*, then I may well successfully refer to the rubbish-bag in which I expect the hearer to put their rubbish; but I do not correctly refer to it, on our usual understanding of the sense of the word *bin*.

3.2.2.2 The limits of sense and reference

A linguistic expression refers if it picks out an entity or set of entities in some world – either the real world, or some possible or imagined world. It will be obvious from this description that whether or not a linguistic expression refers will depend on the context in which it is used. For example, consider the sentence *Marion is a professional harpist*. The first noun phrase, the name *Marion*, identifies a particular individual as the entity about whom the information *is a professional harpist* is given. The second noun phrase, however, *a professional harpist*, would usually be said not to refer in this context. This is because it does not pick out a particular entity or set of entities as its object in the same way as expressions like *Marion*. Instead, *a professional harpist* has a predicative function: it is part of the information given about Marion. Similarly, the phrases *high in fibre*, *low in fat* and *cholesterol free* in (10) are predicative and thus non-referring:

(10) *Like all dried fruit, apricots are high in fibre, low in fat and cholesterol free.*

Apricots, by contrast, refers (to the class of apricots), and *all dried fruit* refers to the class of *dried fruit*.

Many lexical categories are typically non-referential. Verbs, for example, are typically predicative: the inherent role of a verb is to give information about some already identified entity, rather than to refer to that entity directly. Nevertheless, it will often be useful to think of verbs as referring to actions, and of sentences as referring to situations, and this is a usage we will often adopt in this book.

It is also important to note that reference is usually accomplished at the phrasal, not the lexical, level. Thus, in English, it is noun phrases which refer and not the individual nouns which make them up. In the sentence *An heir to a Danish steel fortune must leave behind his quiet life in Stockholm* it is the noun phrases – *An heir to a Danish steel fortune*, *a Danish steel fortune*, *his quiet life in Stockholm*, and *Stockholm* – which accomplish the identification of particular entities in the world. Since *Stockholm*, as a proper noun, is analysed as a noun phrase in its own right, it is the only noun in the sentence which does uniquely pick out or refer to a particular entity (the

capital of Sweden) – but it only does this as a noun phrase, not as an individual noun. None of the other individual nouns in the sentence constitutes a noun phrase, and as a result, none of them refers: *heir*, *fortune*, and *life* do not in themselves identify any single entities about which information could be given. However, in other contexts, they can certainly refer. For example, *life* in the sentence *life is uneventful* is part of a noun phrase referring to an entity, life.

QUESTION Which of the following noun phrases are used referentially? What problems are there in deciding?

- The winner will receive this set of plastic-coated barbecue forks.*
- A woman came into the room.*
- No one wants a hole in the head.*
- Any novelist would want to win the Booker.*
- Some woman came into the room.*
- Every novelist would want to win the Booker.*
- Boeing is planning to build a new passenger jet.*
- Santa Claus was invented by the Coca Cola company; he doesn't really exist.*
- The kangaroo is most active at night.*
- If you hear some news, let me know.*
- Is there any such thing as time travel?*
- There is no life in a fluorescent tube.*
- Make me a ham sandwich, would you?*
- The only thing left is broken.*
- The only thing to do is cancel.*
- Smith's murderer is insane.*
- The ability to pour patterns into drinks will let your customers and friends know that you are serious about espresso.*

The importance of predication shows that reference is not always a relevant aspect of the meaning of a linguistic term. Furthermore, the difference between referring and non-referring uses of lexemes is often not marked by any overt grammatical means: languages, in other words, often don't seem to care whether an expression refers or not. As a result, the question of whether a given noun phrase refers may sometimes be ambiguous. While some expressions clearly refer and others clearly don't, there is a range of intermediate cases in which an expression may or may not be referring. These possibilities are reflected in the following sentences, from Givón (1984: 389):

- (11) a. *If you see **the man** with the green hat, tell him...*
- b. *If you see **a man** with a green hat, tell him ...*
 - (i) *Referential: I have such a man in mind, and if you see **him***
 - (ii) *Non-referential: I don't have any particular man in mind, so if you see **one**...*
- c. *If you see someone with a green hat there, tell **him/them** ...*
- d. *If you see anybody with a green hat there, tell **them** ...*

(11a) is clearly referential, (11b) may or may not be, (11c) is probably non-referential, but still might be intended to pick out a specific individual, whereas (11d) is least likely to refer to a specific person.

QUESTION What factors apart from the existence or non-existence of a specific referent might determine the speaker's choice between (11) a–d?

3.2.3 Deixis

Certain types of expression, called **deictic** or **indexical expressions** (or simply **deictics** or **indexicals**), are defined as those which make reference to some aspect of the context of utterance as an essential part of their meaning. Examples would be the English words *here* and *there* and their equivalents in other languages, such as Chinese *zhe* and *na*, or Hungarian *ez* and *az* ('this', 'that'). Deictic expressions have the peculiarity that their reference is relative to the situation in which they are used. They lack any independently paraphraseable sense: what they mean cannot be given any general description other than describing a procedure for isolating the intended referent. The meaning of *this* in (12), for example, cannot be described except by saying that it refers to some entity in the speaker's context of utterance – probably a person, but also perhaps an electronic chess board, a computer, or an introductory book about chess:

(12) *This is my old chess coach.*

The speaker of (12) might well accompany their utterance with a gesture pointing to, or otherwise indicating, the object they have in mind. In the absence of such a gesture, the listener has to infer what the intended referent is. This they will partly be able to do as a result of the deictic system available in the language. The hearer of (12), for instance, would be justified in assuming that the speaker is referring to something nearby: if this were not the case, the deictic *that* would have been used instead (for example if the speaker and hearer had passed someone on the street and a few moments later, when they had disappeared from sight, the speaker exclaimed *That was my old chess coach!*). The meaning or sense of *this*, therefore, could be described as an instruction to the hearer to identify some likely referent in their near proximity, and the meaning of *that* as the instruction to identify some likely referent further away.

There is not nearly enough space here for a full discussion of the semantics of deictics in the languages of the world. Different sorts of deixis, or reference to elements of the context, have been observed cross-linguistically. These include the following:

- person deixis, by which speaker (*I*), hearer (*you*) and other entities relevant to the discourse (*he/she/it/they*) are referred to;
- temporal deixis (*now, then, tomorrow*); and
- discourse deixis, which refers to other elements of the discourse in which the deictic expression occurs (*A: You stole the cash. B: That's a lie*).

Here, we will confine ourselves to a discussion, closely based on Diessel (1999), of spatial deixis as it is manifested in demonstratives, of which English *this* and *that* are cardinal examples.

All languages have at least two deictically contrastive demonstratives: the *this* demonstrative is usually called a proximal, the *that* demonstrative is called a distal. Sometimes these demonstratives are uninflected particles; in other languages, demonstratives are marked for gender, number and/or case and may combine with derivational affixes or with other free forms (Diessel 1999: 13). The demonstrative systems of some languages may be dizzyingly complex: Inuktitut (Eskimo-Aleut, Canada), for example, shows 686 forms in the demonstrative system (Denny 1982: 372).

Deictic systems which, unlike English, involve more than two deictic terms are of two basic sorts: distance-oriented systems, where the deictic centre (usually but not necessarily the speaker) is the only point of reference for the location of the referent, and person-oriented systems, where the hearer serves as another reference point (Diessel 1999: 50). Yimas (Sepik-Ramu, Papua New Guinea; Diessel 1999: 39) is an example of a distance-oriented deictic system, with the singular deictics *p-k* 'proximal', *m-n* 'medial', *p-n* 'distal'. The proximal and distal forms could be translated as 'this here' and 'that over there' respectively; the medial term means something like 'that just over there'. Pangasinan (Austronesian, Philippines; Diessel 1999: 39) is an example of a person-oriented system, with the singular forms *(i)yá* 'this near the speaker', *(i)tán* 'that near the hearer' and *(i)mán* 'that away from both speaker and hearer'.

Distance is not the only feature expressed by demonstratives: they may also indicate such variables as whether the referent is in or out of sight, at a higher or lower elevation, up- or downstream, moving towards or away from the deictic centre, and others (Diessel 1999: 50). The deictic system of Khasi (Mon-Khmer, India; Diessel 1999: 42) combines a number of these categories, indicating, as well as the gender or plurality of the referent, its distance with respect to speaker and hearer, its elevation, or its visibility (see Table 3.1):

Table 3.1. Khasi demonstratives (Diessel 1999: 42).

	MASC.SG.	FEM.SG.	PL
PROXIMAL	<i>u-ne</i>	<i>ka-ne</i>	<i>ki-ne</i>
MEDIAL (NEAR H)	<i>u-to</i>	<i>ka-to</i>	<i>ki-to</i>
DISTAL	<i>u-tay</i>	<i>ka-tay</i>	<i>ki-tay</i>
UP	<i>u-tey</i>	<i>ka-tey</i>	<i>ki-tey</i>
DOWN	<i>u-thie</i>	<i>ka-thie</i>	<i>ki-thie</i>
INVISIBLE	<i>u-ta</i>	<i>ka-ta</i>	<i>ki-ta</i>

Demonstratives usually also provide some qualitative information about the referent: 'they may indicate whether the referent is a location, object or person, whether it is animate or inanimate, human or non-human, female or male, a single entity or a set, or conceptualized as a restricted or extended entity' (Diessel 1999: 50). In Apalai (Carib, Brazil), for instance, there are two

deictic series, one for animate, the other for inanimate referents, and each series distinguishes collective from non-collective referents:

Table 3.2. Apalai demonstratives (Diessel 1999: 48).

	ANIMATE		INANIMATE	
	NON-COLL	COLL	NON-COLL	COLL
PROXIMAL	<i>mose</i>	<i>moxiámo</i>	<i>seny</i>	<i>senohne</i>
MEDIAL	<i>mokyro</i>	<i>mokaro</i>	<i>moro</i>	<i>morohne</i>
DISTAL	<i>moky</i>	<i>mokamo</i>	<i>mony</i>	<i>monohne</i>

3.3 Dictionary and encyclopaedia

Since reference is an important part of the meaning of many words, many linguists have wanted to distinguish knowledge we have of a word's meaning (sense) from knowledge we might have about its denotation – the set of things it refers to. Some sort of distinction like this seems to be required for a number of reasons. The most powerful is that it is firmly present in our pretheoretical intuitions. For example, all of us know many things about frogs, but something seems wrong about regarding all this information as part of the *meaning* of *frog*. Examples of information about frogs that it would seem absurd to claim as part of the *meaning* of *frog* include the facts that there is a famous fairy story in which a frog is an enchanted prince waiting to be released by the kiss of a princess, that frogs are often (and somewhat offensively) associated by English speakers with French people, or that the Australian water-holding frog burrows underground and surrounds itself in a transparent cocoon made of its own shed skin. There are many English speakers who do not know these things about frogs, but who can correctly refer to frogs. This contrasts with speakers of other languages, or with learners of English who have not yet learned the word *frog*, who may know these things about frogs, but do not yet know what the English word *frog* means. It would seem, then, that there is a firm line between knowledge of a word's meaning and knowledge of factual information about the word's denotation.

3.3.1 Knowledge of meaning and knowledge of facts

In Chapter 2 we mentioned the contrast between dictionary and thesaurus models of semantic organization (see the text box in 2.1.1). The sort of considerations we have just mentioned give rise to another contrast, that between dictionary and encyclopaedia aspects of meaning. This is the distinction between knowledge of a word's meaning (dictionary knowledge), which would be conceived of as something fairly concise, perhaps like a dictionary definition, and encyclopaedic knowledge of facts about the objects to which the word refers. Dictionary knowledge is knowledge of the essential meaning of a word that all speakers must possess, and which dictionaries must accurately represent in order to allow the meaning to be acquired for the first time. Encyclopaedic knowledge, by contrast, is not essential to the meaning

of the word and will vary significantly from speaker to speaker. Encyclopaedic knowledge is *not linguistic in nature*: that is, it does not determine any of a word's linguistic behaviour. The question of which elements of the encyclopaedic information associated with a given word are relevant in any one situation is decided by general pragmatic principles, which have been described in a number of different ways (see Chapter 4).

The motivation for the distinction between dictionary and encyclopaedia is the fact that encyclopaedic knowledge seems to be quite independent of dictionary knowledge: thus, I need not know anything about fairy tales or the Australian water-holding frog in order to be able to use the word *frog*. Furthermore, it has been assumed that some such distinction must be psychologically realistic. If all of the encyclopaedic information associated with a word were part of its meaning, this would surely be too much for the brain to process. If, on the other hand, all that language-processing involves is the retrieval of the concise dictionary-style representation associated with each word, then it appears as a much more streamlined and efficient process, much easier for the brain to accomplish – and much easier also for the computers on which we try to model the brain-processes involved in language (see Chapter 8).

The distinction between dictionary and encyclopaedia is not limited to referring expressions like *frog*. It also applies to predicating ones, like English verbs and adjectives. If we accept the distinction, it becomes important to be able to say exactly which pieces of information about a lexeme belong to the dictionary and which to the encyclopaedia. This is a particularly acute problem where it is necessary for practical reasons (for example lexicographical ones) to arrive at some precise description of a lexeme's semantic content. In order to appreciate the descriptive issues involved here, we can consider the Warlpiri verb *pinyi*, usually glossed 'hit', which is often ambiguous between the meanings 'hit' and 'kill':

- (13) *yapa kapu-ma pinyi.*
 person AUX.FUT-1S hit/kill
 'I'll hit that person'/'I'll kill that person'.

There are at least two possible ways of analysing this ambiguity. The first is that *pinyi* has two meanings, 'hit' and 'kill', which, in certain contexts, may be simultaneously present. The second is that there is one single, underspecified meaning, which we can only describe in English as 'hit/kill'. On this theory, it is the context which determines whether *pinyi* describes an act of hitting or of killing, just as context determined the reading of the English possessive morpheme in (1) above. This second solution would be favoured by many scholars. Whenever we are faced, says Levinson (2000: 20), 'with a linguistic expression that is apparently systematically ambiguous, we should entertain the possibility that the correct analysis is in fact a simple, univocal, semantically broad sense with a defeasible set of generalized pragmatic restrictions'. (*Defeasible* means that the restrictions can be overcome by adding elements to the sentence which enforce one reading at the expense of the other. In (13), we could

add an expression meaning ‘dead’ to the sentence which would eliminate the ambiguity.)

What would the details of this underspecified solution be? How does context contribute to the contextual interpretation of *pinyi*? The English translations usually offered of sentences like (14) and (15) suggest that typically domestic animals like dogs usually provoke the ‘hit’ interpretation of *pinyi*, whereas typically wild, edible ones like kangaroos are associated with ‘kill’:

(14) *maliki pi-nyi*
 dog hit/kill-NPST
 ‘hitting the dog’

(15) *marlu pi-nyi*
 roo hit/kill-NPST
 ‘killing the kangaroo’

In contexts like (15), the ‘kill’ reading is quite strongly entrenched: as noted by the exclamation mark, the following statements appear bizarre to Warlpiri speakers:

(16) *ʷati-ngki marlu pu-ngu kala kula marlu-ju*
 man-ERG roo hit/kill-PST but NEG roo-TOP
pali-ja.
 die-PST
 ‘The man *pinyi* the kangaroo but the kangaroo did not die.’

(17) *ʷati-ngki ka marlu pi-nyi marlu-ju*
 man-ERG AUX roo hit/kill-NPST roo-TOP
wankaru juku.
 alive still
 ‘The man *pinyi* the kangaroo but the kangaroo is still alive.’

On an underspecified view of the meaning of *pinyi*, it is the encyclopaedic knowledge which Warlpiri speakers have about their world which allows them to correctly understand what is meant in the sentences above. In contexts such as (13), where the object is equally likely to be hit or killed, there is no way of telling which interpretation is appropriate without further specification: the underspecification of the verb leaves no way of deciding. Further support for the underspecified solution comes from sentence (18):

(18) *cat pi-nyi*
 cat hit/kill-NPST
 ‘hit a cat’/‘kill a cat’

Cats are neither traditional domestic nor wild animals for Warlpiri people; as a result (18) constitutes a ‘neutral’ context without established encyclopaedic expectations, where the verb may convey either sense. But once the

verb is inserted into a grammatical context which specifies the object, encyclopaedic facts come into play to determine the intended reading.

Distinguishing between lexical dictionary knowledge and factual encyclopaedic knowledge thus enables an economical description of meaning. The lexical entry for *pinyi* does not need to detail the different contexts in which the two readings occur: this is not part of our knowledge of the *meaning* of the verb. Instead, the lexical entry simply contains the meaning 'hit/kill', and the choice of reading in any one context is reached on encyclopaedic grounds. The details of Warlpiri speakers' representation of their encyclopaedic knowledge, and its interaction with linguistic structures, can then be legitimately neglected by linguists, as part of the explanatory job of psychology.

3.3.2 Problems with the dictionary–encyclopaedia distinction

In spite of its obvious labour-saving advantages in semantic description, the dictionary–encyclopaedia distinction is not accepted by many linguists. This is largely because the boundary between the two seems to be highly permeable, even non-existent. As any comparison of dictionaries will reveal, it is very hard to determine where information stops being part of a word's dictionary meaning and becomes part of the encyclopaedic knowledge we have of its denotation. Which of the following pieces of information, for example, should be considered dictionary information about the meaning of the word *cow*, and which as facts about cows which form part of the encyclopaedic knowledge we have about them?

- they are mammals
- they moo
- they eat grass
- they are four-legged
- they have large eyes
- they live in fields and dairies
- they sometimes wear cow-bells
- they are often farmed for their milk
- they have several stomachs
- their young are called *calves* in English
- they incubate Mad Cow Disease for three to five years if infected
- they chew their food slowly

The difficulty of resolving this kind of question stems from the fact that, depending on the context, it would seem that any part of the supposedly encyclopaedic information associated with a word may become linguistically significant (see Katz and Fodor 1963: 178–179 for discussion). To return to the example of *frog*, note that I can use this in contexts where the dictionary meaning is not even present, and two pieces of encyclopaedic information are invoked. In the context of a discussion about a French person who is unlucky in love, for example, I might utter (19):

(19) *He may be a Frog, but no princess is kissing him.*

Someone would be able to understand this sentence without ever learning the dictionary meaning of the word *frog*, as long as they could make the connections with 'French person' and 'enchanted prince'.

It might be argued that this sort of context simply shows that 'Frenchman' and 'sleeping prince' are, in fact, part of the dictionary entry for *frog* after all, and not just encyclopaedic facts about frogs. But this acknowledgment undermines the very reasons for drawing the dictionary-encyclopaedia distinction in the first place. If we simply reassign a piece of previously encyclopaedic knowledge to the dictionary every time it becomes relevant to the linguistic behaviour of a word, the dictionary starts getting a lot bigger, and looking more and more like an encyclopaedia. The supposed processing benefits of concision in lexical representation thus disappear. Furthermore, we can assign an innovative piece of encyclopaedic knowledge to a word, which can then usurp the word's former dictionary meaning. For example, some people do not know that tomatoes are, strictly speaking, fruit and not vegetables. This allows someone who has just been made aware of this to pedantically use sentences like (20):

(20) *Get me some tomatoes and other fruit.*

Here, a newly acquired piece of encyclopaedic knowledge has affected the co-occurrence possibilities of a lexical item: whereas *tomato* would typically be categorized as a *vegetable*, here it belongs to the incompatible category *fruit*. This sort of phenomenon suggests that there is no possible boundary between knowledge of the meaning of a word, and knowledge about the objects the word denotes. We know a variety of things about words and their denotation, and the greater the likelihood that a particular piece of this knowledge is shared between speaker and hearer, the greater the likelihood that it will determine the word's linguistic properties. Sentence (20), for example, would be perfectly natural in the mouth of a botany student who was about to do an experiment on seeded fruit.

Langacker (1987: 159) sums up the case for the abandonment of any strict division between the dictionary and the encyclopaedia:

I do not specifically claim that all facets of our knowledge of an entity have equal status, linguistically or otherwise – quite the contrary. The multitude of specifications that figure in our encyclopedic conception of an entity clearly form a gradation in terms of their centrality. Some are so central that they can hardly be omitted from even the sketchiest characterization, whereas others are so peripheral that they hold little significance even for the most exhaustive description. Distinctions of this kind can perfectly well be made within the encyclopaedic approach. The thrust of this view is simply that no specific point along the gradation of centrality can be chosen nonarbitrarily to serve as a demarcation, such that all specifications on one side can uniformly be attributed linguistic significance and all those on the other side are linguistically irrelevant.

This sort of position has some significant methodological and theoretical consequences. Most importantly, it problematizes the notion of *the* meaning

of a word. Since any fact known about a referent may become linguistically significant, the traditional linguistic semantic project of describing the lexical entry associated with each lexeme becomes an unending task, each lexical entry being, in principle, infinite.

QUESTION Consider the Arrernte (Pama-Nyungan, Central Australia) verb *lyelye-ipeme*, whose meaning is described as follows by Henderson and Dobson (1994: *lyelye-ipeme*): ‘push a stick or crowbar into creek sand, moving it around to make the hole bigger so as to force the stick further down. This is done to see if there is enough water there to dig out into a soakage.’ How might one go about deciding which parts of this definition were dictionary knowledge, and which were encyclopaedic? Are there any general criteria for deciding this question?

Summary

The basic question: meaning and context

One of the main questions to be answered by any theory of meaning concerns the *scope* of an expression’s meaning: how much of the total effect of an expression is to be attributed to its meaning, and how much to the context in which it occurs?

We can distinguish two essential types of context:

- the **external** or real-world context *to* which linguistic expressions refer, and
- the **interpersonal** context of linguistic action *in* which any utterance is placed.

External context: sense and reference

Frege distinguished an expression’s **reference**, which concerns the entities which the expression is *about*, from its **sense**, which is the way in which we grasp or understand its referent. In the Fregean view, two crucial features of sense are as follows:

- sense is what our minds ‘grasp’ when we understand the meaning of a word;
- sense *determines* reference; words’ referents are identified through their senses.

Truth has a central place in Frege’s semantics. To know the sense of a sentence is, for Frege, to know how the sentence could be assigned a value as true or false: to know what the *conditions* are that would make it true or false. Knowledge of a sentence’s truth conditions allows us to determine, by looking at the sentence’s referents, whether the world actually is the way the sentence represents it, and thus whether or not the sentence is therefore true.

Predication and deixis

As well as referring, linguistic expressions can often be used to predicate (attribute properties). Verbs, for example, are characteristically

limited to this function. Deictic expressions (otherwise known as deictics or indexicals) are defined as those which make reference to some aspect of the context of utterance as an essential part of their meaning. Examples of deictics in English include the words *I, you and here*. The languages of the world show a large variety of deictic systems.

Knowledge of meaning and knowledge of facts

Since reference is an important part of the meaning of many words, many linguists have wanted to distinguish knowledge we have of a word's meaning (sense) from knowledge we might have about its referent. This is the distinction between lexical ('dictionary') knowledge and factual ('encyclopaedic') knowledge.

The distinction enables an economical description of word meanings, but is often criticized: the boundary between dictionary and encyclopaedia seems to be so highly permeable as to be non-existent.

Further reading

In twentieth-century linguistics, the importance of context has been particularly stressed in the philosophical (Bar-Hillel 1954, Austin 1962, Searle 1969) and social-functional (Halliday 1978, Halliday and Hasan 1985) traditions. For an introduction to approaches to sense and reference in the philosophy of language, see the second part of Devitt and Sterelny (1999). On reference specifically, see Allan (1986: 142–160) and Lyons (1977: 174–196). Lambrecht (1994) looks at reference in discourse. Kripke (1980) and Donnellan (1972), both of which presuppose a certain philosophical literacy, promote an alternative philosophical treatment of sense and reference, opposed to Frege. Readers of French will find short descriptions of numerous deictic systems in Morel and Danon-Boileau (1992). On the dictionary/encyclopaedia distinction see Haiman (1980), Langacker (1987:154–166) and Jackendoff (2002: 281–293).

Exercises

Questions for discussion

1. Illustrate and discuss the following quotation (Haiman 1980: 347):

'Obviously, the classical idea of *meaningfulness*, like that of *grammaticality*, makes a silent appeal to the idea of "normal circumstances": How does it relate to the question of the distinction between dictionary and encyclopaedia in semantics?

2. Characterize the non-truth-conditional differences between the following statements:

Well, there wasn't a fight on Saturday.

Still, there wasn't a fight on Saturday.

After all, there wasn't a fight on Saturday.

Therefore, there wasn't a fight on Saturday.

Alas, there wasn't a fight on Saturday.

1. Read Section 2.2.4 of the previous chapter. Can the contextual modulation of the meanings of *cut* be described in terms of a dictionary/encyclopaedia distinction? How?