

A juxtaposition on the thoughts of three of the greatest analytic philosophers of modern times culminating in a grand unification of the trinity on one of the most fundamental questions of human philosophy: What is meaning?

1. *Putnam's meaning-vector*: In 1975, Hilary Putnam put forth, in his much celebrated research paper "The meaning of 'meaning'", his proposal of meaning. He postulated that the meaning of a word be a function of four items:
 - a) The syntactic markers that apply to it: for e.g. 'noun', 'mass term', etc.
 - b) The *semantic* markers that apply to it: for e.g. 'animal,' or 'period of time,' etc. Essentially, the semantic marker of a word is something that is true of the word with a high degree of unrevisability.
 - c) Further stereotypes over and above the semantic markers, if any. A stereotype, as Putnam defines it, is a conjunction of predicates that may or may not enable a person to recognize the object. It consists of *standardized* features that are *typical*. Not all the criterion used by the experts need be there. The predicates in the stereotype are determined by the linguistic community as a whole, experts and nonexperts. This sense of the word stereotype has none of the ordinary negative connotations which the socially used sense of the word does. Semantic markers are a subset of stereotypes.
 - d) Its (socially determined) extension. The extension of a word is the set of all items it is true of. (We may idealize each sense of a 'word' to be a word in itself.)

 2. *Quine's elimination of ontological commitments*: In 1948, Willard Van Orman Quine published an equally influential paper titled 'On What There Is.' Prof. Putnam himself subsequently said that, by it, Quine "single-handedly made ontology a respectable subject again." Quine has repeatedly stated his preferred ontology as a "desert landscape;" and he thus, in the aforementioned paper, blatantly denies the existence of universals. As a consequence, he ends up "refusing to admit meanings." By this he means not that words and statements are meaningful. Quine says that, according to him, meaningfulness is not the *having* of some abstract entity called meaning. He explicates the meaning of a term in terms of that term's *synonymity* with other terms.

 3. *Wittgenstein*: In his second full-length work, 'Philosophical Investigations', which was published posthumously, Wittgenstein states explicitly: "The meaning of a word is its use in the language." This was, however, preceded by a cautionary statement saying that although this is applicable for a large class of cases, it is not for all.
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And although none of the above three blatantly contradict each other, they certainly seem disparate at first glance.

And so let us give them more than a glance.

Quine's notions of meaning can be boiled down to being a subset of those of Putnam's. Quine suggests defining the meaning of a word in terms of its synonymity with other words.

So if we attempt to define 'iron' so, we would end up using words such as 'metal,' 'hard,' 'silverish,' etc. and these words turn out to be nothing but Putnam's stereotypes and markers of a word.

The extension of a word is something that is left untouched by Quine here; however, we can include Wittgenstein in the party and retain Quine's claim of words not having of some special entity called 'meaning.' Wittgenstein calls the meaning of a word its use in language, and the *use* of a word is easily construed as its *extension*. (Words which are not names for e.g. articles etc. can have their usage constructed in terms of the names.)

Wittgenstein had, indeed, said that the meaning of a word is its use only in most cases, but Putnam finds a way to circumvent this issue. Wittgenstein likely added this cautionary statement in case majority of a society was unaware of the real meaning of a word and using it mistakenly: the meaning of the word is not, in this case, equal to the sense in which most people use it. However, it is indisputable that the *expert* in the linguistic community will know of the meaning best, and Putnam, with his hypothesis of the division of linguistic labor, clears the air with the claim that the extension of a word is determined by the *experts* in the linguistic community, thus eliminating the uncertainty which Wittgenstein likely faced which caused him to add that footnote.

I will conclude with something that may have been nagging the reader for a bit now:

Quine's proposal strikes one as inherently cyclic.

Quine says that a meaning of a word can be explicated in terms of its synonymity with other words; and so the meaning of those other words are each further explicated in terms of their synonymity with some yet other words; and so it goes on and on. (To put it in Putnam's term: a word has a set of stereotypes, and each stereotype, too, has its meaning explicated in terms of some other stereotypes, etc.)

How, one wonders, can this be feasible?

Is language itself one gigantic bootstrap?

There are no such problems with Wittgenstein—one can merely point out a set of sense data and ostensively give it a name. Similarly, this entire circus, too, ends up bottoming out on ostensive definitions, upon which we build stereotypes and markers.