postscript to
'the grammar of 'meaning''[1]

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In 'The Grammar of 'Meaning'' (Brons 2011), I suggested that the verb "to mean" should be understood as a 4-place predicate MEAN':

(1)   MEAN' (AGENT*, SIGN*, D-MEANING, LANGUAGE-GAME**)

in which of the two arguments AGENT and SIGN (marked *) one is obligatory and fills the subject slot and the other is an optional, oblique argument, and in which LANGUAGE-GAME (**) or context of uttering is always an oblique argument. The argument D-MEANING represents 'the meaning' of the sign as that term is usually understood: a description of meaning.

The prime in "MEAN'" marks the distinction from the 2-place predicate MEAN(SUBJECT, D-MEANING), which is grammatically, but not semantically / pragmatically sufficient. The 2-place predicate includes only the obligatory arguments; oblique arguments can be omitted by definition. However, semantically / pragmatically, on pain of incomprehensibility or misunderstanding, oblique arguments can only be 'omitted' if they are contextually specified.

Since publication of 'the Grammar of 'Meaning'', I changed my mind about some of the details of the analysis in that paper. I now belief that "to mean" is a 3-place predicate (semantically). This 'postscript' explains why, and offers an alternative (although largely converging) analysis of the verb "to mean". (It should perhaps be noted that as a postscript, it is not intended to replace the original article, but merely to correct and supplement it.)

The English verb "to mean" can take two different kinds of subjects. Compare, for example:

(2)   In Japanese, "tabun" means "probably".
(3)   With "tabun", mister Satō means "no".

In (2) the subject is a word or sign (tabun); in (3) it is a person (mister Satō). Hence, these two sentences can be understood as involving two different verbs "to mean", *sign-meaning* in (2) and *agent-meaning* in (3). Of course, there is a sign mentioned in (3) (tabun), but it is mere oblique argument, like "in Japanese" in (2).

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1   Draft version: 1.1 (June 7, 2012). This short paper mostly coincides with a section of a working paper that is currently titled 'Indirectly referring verb arguments'. That and other working papers are available at www.lajosbrons.net/wp.

In neither (2) nor (3) the thematic roles of the various sentence parts are entirely unambiguous. (3) is most straightforward because in this sentence "to mean" is more or less an action verb. It seems analyzable something like:

(3a) $\exists x$ [meaning(x) & agent(mister Satō) & theme("no") & instrument("tabun")] ,

although I expect the classification of both "no" as theme and "tabun" as intrument to be controversial. (Because this matters little for the argument here, I will further ignore the issue.) Of these arguments, the instrument can be omitted, it is an oblique argument, and therefore the (n-tuple of) syntactic arguments (*Syn.A*) of "to $_{agent}$mean" is $\langle$agent, theme$\rangle$. However, given the different grammatical functions of different roles in (2) and (3), it is useful to specify both thematic roles and grammatical functions (of the elements of *Syn.A*), the latter in subscript:

(3b) *Syn.A*(to $_{agent}$mean) = $\langle$agent$_{subject}$, theme$_{complement\ clause}\rangle$

As mentioned, (2) is less easily interpreted in terms of standard thematic roles, and even the more detailed role classification of *Role and Reference Grammar* is of little help. "To mean" in this sense seems to be somewhere in between the *equational* and *specificational* verb types with the associated roles of *referents* in the first case, and *variables* and *values* in the second. A sign is not a variable, however, and the equational verb type does not capture the explanatory hierarchy involved in a specification of meaning. Perhaps, the best option is a slight modification of the specificational type, substituting 'sign' for 'variable':

(2a) $\exists x$ [meaning(x) & sign("tabun") & value("probably") & context(in Japanese)]

As in (3a), the last of these arguments is an oblique argument, and thus:

(2b) *Syn.A*(to $_{sign}$mean) = $\langle$sign$_{subject}$, value$_{complement\ clause}\rangle$

It should be noted that "meaning" in (2a) and (3a) is the *event* of meaning, while in ordinary language "meaning" always refers to an abstract object (rather than an event). "Meaning", of course, is a nominalization of "to mean". However, if (2) and (3) are nominalized, something odd happens:

(4)   The meaning of "tabun" in Japanese is "probably".
(4a) $\forall x$ [x="tabun" & Japanese(x) $\rightarrow$ meaning(x,"probably")]
(5)   The meaning of mister Satō's "tabun" is "no".
(5a) $\forall x$ [x="tabun" & mister-Satō's(x) $\rightarrow$ meaning(x,"no")]

Contrary to (2a) and (3a), in (4), (5), and their formal representations "meaning" is an abstract object. More important, however, but not unrelated, is that in both (4) *and* (5) "meaning" is *sign-meaning.* There is in (ordinary) English no nominalized form of agent-meaning (which would be an event). (For more about this, see the original paper (Brons 2011).) Nominalization (5) of (3) reveals that even in case of agent-meaning, the oblique argument specifying the sign ('instrument' in (3a)) is semantically necessary.

Furthermore, these nominalizations also reveal the semantic necessity of some aspect(s) of context. Without the specifications "in Japanese" and "mister Satō's", (4) and (5) make no sense (unless in case of (4) both speaker and hearer know that "tabun" is a Japanese word, and know that the other knows that, but then that aspect of context *is specified*, albeit contextually and implicitly rather than linguistically and explicitly). For "to mean" to mean anything, the *language-game* (to borrow Wittgenstein's notion)[2] in which the sign is embedded needs to be specified. The semantic function of "mister Satō" in (3/5) is the identification of a specific idiolect or utterance-occasion, hence a specific language-game: within that language-game, "tabun" means "no". Consequently, if (the *n*-tuple of) semantic arguments (*Sem.A*) is formalized like syntactic arguments (*Syn.A*), then:

(6)   *Sem.A*(to mean) = ⟨sign, language-game, value⟩

which applies to both (2/4) and (3/5). The main difference between sign-meaning as in (2/4) and agent-meaning as in (3), is that the former identifies the language-game as a natural language, dialect or terminology, while the latter identifies it with a speaker and occasion, or a (context-specific) idiolect. Nevertheless, despite the syntactic difference, sign-meaning and agent-meaning are semantically identical.

Converting (1), the 4-place predicate understanding of "to mean" of the original paper, into the style of formalization used here results in:

(1a)   *Sem.A*(to mean)* = ⟨agent, sign, language-game, value⟩

Aside from the small change of terminology ('D-MEANING' is now 'value'), there is a more important (and more obvious) difference: the omission of the argument 'agent' in (6). According to (6), the agent is not a semantically necessary argument. That this is the case, that the speaker him/herself is not a semantic argument, but merely an identifier of a language game, becomes clear if one considers the alternative: agent-meaning would then attribute fixed and non-context-dependent vocabularies to speakers, which is both nonsense, and not what is intended in uses of agent-meaning. The reference is to a speaker's words in context, hence to a language game.

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2   Wittgenstein (1953) introduced the concept of "language-game" to *refer to a variety* of notions of language (o*r* language–like signing systems) in use/action in some (specific) context.

Comparing the semantic structure of the verb "to mean" as given in (6) with the syntax of (2) and (3), as in the table below, reveals that *both* sign-meaning and agent-meaning obscure the semantically essential role and the nature of language-games.

(6) *Sem.A* = ⟨ sign ,	language-game ,	value ⟩
(2)	*"tabun"*	*In Japanese*	*"probably"*
sign-meaning	sign (subject)	context	value (complement clause)
	core argument	oblique argument	core argument
(3)	*"tabun"*	the idiolect or utterance-occasion	*"no"*
agent-meaning	instrument	identified by mentioning mister Satō	theme (complement clause)
	oblique argument	(agent (subject); core argument)	core argument

In agent-meaning, the language-game is not an argument itself, but is indirectly represented by an agent (speaker, writer, etc.). That agent is not a semantic argument itself, however, and thus obscures the essential role of the language game. Sign-meaning to some extent obscures the language-game by making it a mere oblique argument, but much more important is that it disconnects language-games from speakers, and seems to make them objective, near monolithic things. (See also Davidson's (1986, 1994) arguments for the 'primacy of the idiolect'.) In a sense, in agent-meaning (the representation of) the role of the speaker is too strong, while in sign-meaning it is too weak.

It was mentioned above that language-games can be specified contextually and implicitly rather than linguistically and explicitly. This happens automatically in agent-meaning by deferring to the speaker, but it is also very common in sign-meaning. Take the following sentence as an example:

(7)   "Univocal" means "having only one meaning".

The unspecified language-game here is the English language, or – more likely – some terminological part thereof. In a case like (7), if the language-game is not mentioned, it defaults to the most salient language-game that the sign could be part of (Japanese in case of "tabun"; geology in case of "bedrock"; some English terminology in case of "univocal", and so forth). More in general, if a semantic core argument is not explicitly mentioned, it defaults to what is *most salient* in the context of (the utterance of) the sentence.[3]

> But salience is a relative notion – relative to the speaker, his addressees, and their particular
> common ground at the moment. Recently, a colleague heard a woman ask her husband as she
> was about to lift her baby into their car, Couldn't you help me by doing a Chomsky? Who would

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3 The role of such unspecified arguments and their (salient) defaults is the research topic of *Default semantics*.

ever have thought do a Chomsky could have meant "open the car door"? Yet, as it later came out, she and her husband had been out with Noam Chomsky the week before – her only visit with him – when he had courteously opened the car door as she struggled in with her baby. With do a Chomsky, she was alluding to an act associated with Chomsky that was especially salient in her and her husband's common ground – they had perhaps discussed Chomsky's courtesy in the meantime. It did not matter that the act was not part of the common ground she shared with anyone else. She was speaking to her husband, and so it had to be salient only in their common ground. (Clark & Gerrig 1983, pp. 599-600)

references

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