Probabilistic Semantics as Applied to Euphemism

Elizabeth Leinfellner
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Leinfellner, Elizabeth, "Probabilistic Semantics as Applied to Euphemism" (1976). *Transactions of the Nebraska Academy of Sciences and Affiliated Societies*. 407.
https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tnas/407

PROBABILISTIC SEMANTICS AS APPLIED TO EUPHEMISM

ELISABETH LEINFELLNER

820 South 13th
Lincoln, Nebraska 68508

In natural languages there are various ways of indicating the probable character of sentences: (i) by simply adding operators like "probably," "perhaps," and so on; (ii) by using the subjunctive; (iii) by using the future tense; and (iv) by forming sentences which — intentionally or unintentionally — do not express adequately the situation under consideration. An example for (iv) is for instance the sentence "The situation looks good" when in reality it is rather not so good. There are, of course, mixtures between (i), (ii), (iii), and (iv) possible. One of the linguistic differences between (i), (ii), and (iii) on the one hand and (iv) on the other hand is, that case (iv) can lead to a change of meaning. (iv) comprises those expressions of natural languages which we call "not literal," "figurative," and the like. It is obvious that at least case (iv) may be explained best by a probabilistic semantics. As a specific example of (iv) we will discuss here euphemism and add one traditional explication of "euphemism:" a euphemism is a pleasant way of referring to something unpleasant; a kakophemism, by the way, is simply the opposite of a euphemism.

For theoretical reasons we will in general exclude euphemistic words and expressions shorter than a sentence, and also religious euphemisms (Leinfellner, 1971). Only when we will explain the change of meaning we will return to the concept of euphemism as a single word.

We will modify here the standard method of allotting probabilities to sentences, where a sentence is probable with respect to another one, $p(S_1, S_2) = r$, by using a relation of euphemistic difference, e, which is to be founded pragmatically. The difference between the cases (i)-(iii) and (iv) thus lies also in the pragmatic foundation or nature of e: i.e. in order to explain case (iv) we have to take into consideration the personal attitude of the speaker, the language user in general. In the following model of euphemism we have to assume that there exists always an empirically true sentence B — for practical reasons we exclude here empirically false sentences — which is empirically true with respect to the same empirical situation to which the euphemistic sentence E refers euphemistically: $e(E, B) = r$. e has two limit cases: a euphemism ceases to be one when $r = 1$; and it turns into a total lie when $r = 0$. In the case that r lies between 0 and 1, $0 < r < 1$, we have a euphemism. If we could compute r, we could compute the absolute euphemistic shift, either of the sentence E, or, as we will see later, of the euphemistic meaning compared to the basic or empirical one. It is also clear

that we can insert between 0 and 1 various degrees of euphemistic "efficiency;" they are topological values of variously "shaded" euphemisms. Let us show this in an example: There exists a political euphemism – which, by the way, can be found in at least three different languages – "The situation is grave but by no means hopeless," (Leinfellner, 1971:56, 116) in case the situation is already hopeless. We can now form a sequence of euphemistic expressions which proceeds from the almost true euphemism (i) to an almost false one, (v): (i) "The situation is almost hopeless;" (ii) "The situation is extraordinarily serious;" (iii) "The situation is grave but by no means hopeless;" (iv) "The situation is decisive;" (v) "The situation looks quite good," and so on. Thus we get a topological grading of various euphemisms with respect to one sentence B. But since we cannot measure the absolute euphemistic shift, we try to measure the relative one; the latter actually expresses adequately the euphemistic effect of a given euphemistic sentence. Simplified we proceed as follows. We present a euphemism, for example a political one, to two groups of participants, each of them consisting of ten persons. Group 1, the specialists or experts, consists of people, who have, so to speak, more judgment; in the case of a political euphemism group 1 is for example a group of journalists, politicians, political scientists, and so forth. Group 2 consists of "ordinary" citizens, laymen; their judgment is supposed to be less clear. Group 1 estimates and accepts the euphemism with a coefficient of $s = 0.1$, group 2 with a coefficient of $s' = 0.9$. We can now form the euphemistic difference D, expressed by the absolute value $s - s'$. The euphemistic difference can never be greater than 1; it is relative to the time t, the groups in question, and the like. When the euphemistic difference is 0, the euphemistic effect is 0; the euphemistic effect is maximal, when the euphemistic difference is 1 (Leinfellner, 1971:63).

Here now is the point where the need for a probabilistic semantics and a clarification of the concept of meaning may arise. If we look at our formulation $e(E, B) = r$ more closely, we realize that when we talk about E we actually talk about the "sense" of E, the linguistic or expanded contextual meaning of E; and when we talk about B, we actually have in mind the empirical meaning of E itself. What is – in our theory – empirical meaning? Quine says in "Meaning and Translation" that empirical meaning is that what remains when we peel away the words (Quine, 1964). But what is that what remains? For our purposes – and I repeat again – for our purposes it is ' sufficient to identify the empirical meaning of a specific empirical term, word with the designatum; this has to be based upon the relatively constant connection of word and designatum by means of a one-one relation of designation which is applied by the language user. The empirical meaning of a sentence is given if(f) (i) the conditions for the empirical meanings of the words are fulfilled; (ii) there exists a one-one relation of designation between

the sentence as a whole and the empirical situation, holistic system, etc. which is to be described; and (iii) the empirical truth conditions are fulfilled. In the case of the empirically false sentence, the sentence, of course, refers to the type-bound empirical opposite of what the sentence says.

For the contextual or linguistic meaning of the words and sentences we use the semantics in the form Abraham and Kiefer (1966) have developed. We can outline it here only very roughly. Abraham-Kiefer's semantics coincides in some points with Katz-Fodor's, but avoids many of the shortcomings of the latter; it is also less clumsy. In this theory the, so to speak, codified contextual meaning of a word a — which is actually a codified set of contexts of a — appears as a matrix with one row and as many columns as there are semantical and also syntactical categories. This matrix can be thought of as being one path in Katz-Fodor's semantic graph, with exclusion of the semantic distinguisher. It is obvious that this matrix will be a specific kind of reachability matrix. After various formal procedures the matrices of various words can be united in one large matrix; thus they form together a meaningful sentence. This matrix is actually the linguistic or expanded contextual meaning of the sentence in codified form. It follows that if we have i matrices for one sentence that the sentence is i times ambiguous. If two sentences share a matrix, they are synonymous. Since the matrix codifies the use of language it is at the same time also a formal expression of Wittgenstein's meaning in use.

If we add these explications to our model of euphemism, we see clearly that euphemistic sentences, unlike metaphorical ones, are — from the standpoint of linguistic semantics — not semantically anomalous; they "make sense." Only the listener to or the reader of such a sentence confuses or at least should confuse its linguistic meaning with its empirical one.

Here I have to add a warning: One should not expect too much from a purely linguistic semantics; in my opinion it is necessary that linguistic semantics always has to be complemented by a descriptive one, even though we can separate linquistic and empirical meaning for the purpose of analysis (Leinfellner, 1969:232).

We can now apply our model to meanings; for this purpose we have to define empirical meaning by a kind of definite description. We assume that there is a relation between the empirical and the linguistic meaning of a sentence; this relationship can be interpreted probabilistically. If we take speaker and listener, or writer and reader into consideration, we get the following classifications. In order to simplify the situation we operate here with degrees of compatibility rather than with a probabilistic relationship:

1. In the case of the factually true sentence empirical and linguistic meaning have to be completely compatible; they have to match.

2. If they are completely incompatible, the sentence is false, or, if we

125

take the speaker or writer into consideration: the sentence is a total error, a total lie, or a total irony.

3. If they are partially compatible, and if we take the speaker or writer into consideration, then we get either a euphemism, a kakophemism, a partial irony perhaps in the form of an understatement (understatements are often viewed as ironies), a partial error, or a partial lie. Since the sentences of this paragraph can be held apart only pragmatically — this holds true also for some of the sentences from group 2 — it is possible to enhance a partial lie by saying it was meant to be an irony, and the like.

Euphemism is one of the meaning changing devices of natural languages. If the language users employ the same euphemistic word — the one which infects, so to speak, the whole sentence and makes it to a euphemistic one — again and again for a certain event, thing, etc., then various linguistic situations can be the result, e.g. the old, not euphemistic word disappears and the euphemism takes its place. That means that the formerly euphemistic word looses its euphemistic effect and becomes stabilized in new contexts: a change of the linguistic meaning has taken place, and, as to the empirical meaning, a new relation of designation appears. It can also happen that simply a new lexical or contextual meaning is added to already existing ones. Given this situation it might become necessary to coin a new euphemism: during the war in Vietnam the expression "search and destroy" was changed to "search and clear," and later to "reconnaissance in force."

If we go back to the concept of the contextual meaning of a word as a vector, a one-row matrix, then it is clear that during the time when the change of meaning takes place there must exist at least two vectors, and that they must occur in a certain statistical distribution.

One final, rather hypothetical remark: It seems that the idea of contextual meaning as developed in Abraham-Kiefer could be used to formulate a finite-state semantics which could be applied to word meanings and on the sentence level to immediate constituents of two or three members.

LITERATURE CITED

Abraham, S. and F. Kiefer, 1966. A theory of structural semantics. The Hague-Paris, Mouton & Co.

Leinfellner, E., 1969. Zur nominalistischen Begründung von Linguistik und Sprachphilosophie: Fritz Mauthner und Ludwig Wittgenstein. Studium Generale 22.

_____, 1971. Der Euphemismus in der politischen Sprache. Duncker & Humblot, Berlin.

Quine, W. V., 1964. Meaning and translation, In Fodor, J. A. and J. J. Katz, The Structure of Language. Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey.