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## **Making sense of sense**

It's one of the expressions that we often say: 'That makes sense', or 'That doesn't make sense'. Or again, 'I understand', or 'I don't understand'. The sentences sound so simple. But when we begin to explore what is involved in the notions of 'sense' and 'understanding', whether as linguists or as language teachers, we find we need to take into account an unexpected diversity of factors. I shall talk about five of them in this paper – five perspectives which we need to be aware of if we hope to 'make sense of sense'.

The diversity is underestimated because of a widespread fallacy: that 'meaning' is to be found in vocabulary, in individual words. We hear it acknowledged, for example, when we say, 'I don't know the meaning of that word. I'll look it up in a dictionary.' We look it up, and, if we're lucky, we'll find an entry with just one meaning, and that is our answer. *Handkerchief*, for instance, has just one meaning in English – the small square of fabric used for personal purposes, such as wiping the nose. But if we work our way through an English dictionary, we find that such monosemic items are the exception rather than the rule. Most headwords have more than one meaning – they are polysemic. Some have dozens. A verb like *take* has 63 different meanings listed in the unabridged *OED*, and that excludes idiomatic phrases such as *take aim* and *take charge*. I went through a concise dictionary once and calculated the average: it was 2.4 meanings per headword. So there is almost always a choice to be made, when we look a word up.

We forget this polysemy whenever we think of a word as simply 'having a meaning'. It is easy to show that there is no simple correlation between 'word' and 'meaning'. If meaning is to be found in a word, then all I have to do to convey that meaning is to say the word, and you will know what I mean. *Table*. Now you know what I mean. But of course you don't know what I mean. In my head, I might be thinking of a piece of furniture, a figure in a book, a plateau or mountain top, or even the abbreviated name of an organization (such as the British charitable organization, *The Round Table*). How will you know what I have in mind? The answer is obvious: 'put it in a context', you will say, 'and then we will know what you mean'. But how do I do that? I could point to the relevant context, if one were nearby, but that is inconvenient and often impossible. Rather, I will put the word into a sentence. In the case of *table*, *The leg on the table is broken* selects the 'furniture' sense. *There are two mistakes in the first row of the table* selects the 'book' sense. *We spent all morning climbing up to the table* selects the plateau sense. *I gave some money to the Table* selects the charity sense. And so on. In short, we need *grammar* to make sense of words.

Grammar is the first perspective we need in order to understand the notion of *sense*. That is, essentially, what sentences are for: their primary function is to make sense of words. And not just sentences as wholes, but the constructions within sentences too, such as clauses and phrases. Every bit of grammar, from the largest construction to the tiniest word-ending, exists to express some sort of meaning, and it is the combination of grammatical features that allows us to convey sense. Without grammar, there is the permanent risk of ambiguity. Children have to learn this Truth. I recall daughter Suzie, at 18 months, at the one-word stage of language acquisition, coming into the room carrying a teddy-bear, and saying to me *Push*. I gave her a playful push, but she rejected it. *No, push*, she said again, more insistently. I thought for a moment, then showed her I was ready to be pushed. *No, push*, she said again, vigorously shaking her head. Eventually we worked it out. What she meant was: 'Come with me into the other room, where there is a toy swing, put teddy on the swing, and push teddy'. 'Why didn't you say that?' I might have asked her. And if she could have replied, she would have said, 'Because I am only at the holophrastic stage of child language acquisition, and have learned no syntax yet. Ask me again in six months' time and I'll do better!' And indeed, six months or so later, as she entered the three- and four-element stages of language acquisition, she was able to say such things as 'You

push me' and 'Me push you' (Subject + Verb + Object), and 'You push teddy in there' (Subject + Verb + Object + Adverbial).

Without grammar, then, there can be no sense. But grammar alone is not enough. We can have a perfectly well-formed sentence, and yet it might still not make sense, and we have to say 'I don't understand you', because we have not taken account of the *pragmatics*. Pragmatics is the study of the choices we make when we use language – of the intentions behind our choices and the effects that these choices convey. Obvious examples of choice include the selection of informal vs formal options in grammar (e.g. *they're* vs *they are*, *tu* vs *vous*), the decision to use or avoid a swear-word (e.g. *that's a disgrace* vs *that's a bloody disgrace*), and the intimate vs distant use of names, where there may be several choices (someone called *John Jones* might be addressed as *John*, *Jones*, *Johnny*, *Jonesy*, *Mr Jones*...). Pragmatics, being one of the most recent branches of linguistics to develop, has yet to be systematically incorporated into language-teaching frameworks, but it is always present, very important in order to understand what is going on in politeness, rudeness, and embarrassment, and always a factor which could influence our comprehension of what someone has said or written.

Let's look at some examples of underlying intentions. In a classroom, if a teacher says to a pupil 'There's a piece of chalk on the floor', the correct response of the pupil is not to say 'Yes I can see it', but rather to pick it up. Similarly, when someone says 'It's very hot in here', this is usually a hint for someone to open a window. These are *indirect speech acts*. Questions can be indirect too. Someone comes into the room and leaves the door open, which elicits the caustic 'Do you live in a barn?', intending that the offender should close the door. These questions don't usually require any verbal response. Many kinds of rhetorical question fall into this category: – 'How should I know?', 'Am I going mad?' – as do the unanswerable questions of threat or aggression: 'Are you looking at me?', 'Do you think I'm an idiot?', 'Do I have to tell you everything?'

This last one reminds us that it is here we need to locate the often-discussed differences between men and women. When a woman says something, what does she really mean? When a man says something, what does he really mean? Deborah Tannen calls her best-selling book on this subject *You Just Don't Understand*. It's full of stories like the following (p. 175), which she takes from Ann Tyler's 1985 novel *The Accidental Tourist*:

Macon and Muriel have been living together, but Macon is still legally married to someone else. Macon makes a casual remark about Alexander, Muriel's son: 'I don't think Alexander's getting a proper education,' he said to her one evening. 'Oh, he's okay.'

'I asked him to figure what change they'd give back when we bought the milk today, and he didn't have the faintest idea. He didn't even know he'd have to subtract.'

'Well, he's only in second grade,' Muriel said.

'I think he ought to switch to a private school.'

'Private schools cost money.'

'So? I'll pay.'

She stopped flipping the bacon and looked over at him. 'What are you saying?' she said.

'Pardon?'

'What are you saying, Macon? Are you saying you're committed?'

Muriel goes on to tell Macon that he must make up his mind whether he wants to divorce his wife and marry her: She can't put her son in a new school and then have to pull him out when and if Macon returns to his wife. The conversation ends with Macon saying, incredulously, 'But I just want him to learn to subtract!'

Tannen's blurb summarizes the situation:

Why do so many women feel that men don't tell them anything, but just lecture and criticise? Why do so many men feel that women nag them and never get to the point?

And she answers her own questions:

While women use language primarily to make connections and reinforce intimacy, men use it to preserve their independence and negotiate status. The result? Genuine confusion.

It's not my purpose today to resolve this confusion – I wish! – but simply to draw attention to this second, pragmatic perspective for the study of sense. When people say such things as 'My wife doesn't understand me' or 'I don't understand what you're telling me', this is a very different notion of 'understand' from the grammatical notion.

Pragmatics always involves an interactive dimension, as it focuses on speaker/writer intention and audience effect. The third perspective is a *stylistic* one – some prefer the term *genre-specific* – which may or may not be interactive. When scientists, reacting to an argument or a set of results,

say 'Yes, that makes sense', they are not thinking of the literal meaning of the sentences they are hearing or reading. They are relating what they have observed to their mindset or world view, as scientists. In linguistic terms, the language they have just encountered is compatible with the language that defines their subject. Outsiders would not see the point, and might even find the language totally unintelligible, simply because they do not understand the words (i.e. it fails to make lexical or grammatical sense). But here we are talking about insiders. And, seen in this light, we are all insiders of something or other. Talking about how to get from one part of Zurich to another, one person might suggest a route which 'makes sense', while another might suggest a route that 'doesn't make sense'.

It is here, too, that we need to locate cases of provocative non-sense. When politicians listen to an argument from someone who belongs to a different political party, and say 'That proposal makes no sense at all,' we need to categorize this from a linguistic point of view as a genre-specific reaction. They don't mean: 'We don't understand your vocabulary and grammar.' Nor do they mean: 'We don't understand your pragmatic intention.' What they mean is: 'That proposal is in conflict with the policies that our party espouses.' In linguistic terms, 'the language you've used doesn't conform to the language in our policy statements.' Politicians belonging to a particular party are keenly aware that their opposition is eagerly awaiting the moment when they can be accused of inconsistency. 'The honourable member said on June 26th that such-and-such is the case. Now he is saying something different. Will he please make up his mind?' This kind of linguistic point-scoring is typical of the language games politicians have to play.

But when it comes to analysing the notion of 'sense' in relation to English, it is the fourth perspective that is of particular relevance to those learning English as a foreign language. This is the *cultural* perspective, which arises from the growth of English as a global language. Over two billion people speak English now, spread over all the countries on earth, with some countries containing sufficiently large numbers of speakers that a local variety has emerged. The obvious examples are American English vs British English, and later cases such as Australian English, South African English, and Indian English. The 20th century saw the emergence of a wide range of 'new Englishes' in many of the newly independent nations, and today linguists recognize the existence of such international dialects as Ghanaian English, Nigerian English, and Singaporean English, cha-

racterized chiefly by the use of local vocabulary, but also by local forms of grammar, pronunciation, and spelling. This is a very natural process. When a country adopts a language as a local alternative means of communication, it immediately starts adapting it, to meet the communicative needs of the region. Words for local plants and animals, food and drink, customs and practices, politics and religion, sports and games, and many other facets of everyday life soon accumulate a local wordstock which is unknown outside the country and its environs.

I recall on my first visit to South Africa seeing the sentence *ROBOT AHEAD* on a roadside sign, and I was baffled because I did not then know that a *robot* was a traffic-light. I recall being similarly nonplussed on my first visit to the USA, in the 1960s, when I asked for eggs at a diner and was asked by the man behind the counter, 'How do you like your eggs?' At the time, this was not a routine question in British culinary interaction, and I didn't know how to reply. I answered 'cooked'! Today, I know that the expected response includes 'once over lightly', 'sunny-side up', and other eggy expressions. Getting to know South African or American culture requires getting to know the language, and avoiding the misunderstandings which a lack of awareness of the culture can bring. So this is another notion of 'sense' – a cultural notion. 'I don't understand' here means 'I understand what your words mean in my culture, but it seems that they mean something different in yours'.

Problems arise because participants from different countries bring their individual cultural expectations to the interaction, and don't make allowances for ignorance on the part of their interlocutors. For example, someone might drop into a conversation such sentences as the following:

Her handbag was more Petticoat Lane than Bond Street.

It was like Clapham Junction in the street today.

You have to know that there is a street-market in Petticoat Lane (where handbags are likely to be cheap and probably replicas), whereas Bond Street is an expensive shopping area. And you have to know that Clapham Junction is a particularly complicated railway station, where lines from many directions converge, making it one of the busiest railway junctions in the UK. People with a shared cultural background will have no difficulty making sense of these sentences. People who lack this background will have no idea what the speaker is talking about.

I should add at this point that this is nothing to do with the difference between being a native as opposed to a non-native speaker of English. A native speaker of English from outside Britain might have a similar confusion about Petticoat Lane or Clapham Junction. And I have many experiences myself of being confused by English speakers in countries I have visited. Here are two examples, which I take from a recent study I made of cultural contrasts.

Travelling in New Zealand in 2006, I frequently saw roadside advertisements for Tui beer which used the catch-phrase 'Yeah, right'. They have become so successful that two books collecting them have been published. The phrase is an ironic affirmation. When we react to a sentence by saying 'Yeah, right', with each word carrying a low falling intonation, we are expressing some sort of suspicion about its content, as these examples illustrate:

Let your mum stay as long as she likes. Yeah right.  
 Quiet student seeks room. Yeah right.  
 Of course I remember your name. Yeah right.  
 One careful lady owner. Yeah right.

These particular ads are culturally neutral, in the sense that they would be understood in most English-speaking (and doubtless other-speaking) societies. But others require an intimate knowledge of New Zealand culture to make any sense at all, for they rely on local knowledge of names and places.

There are no skeletons in Rodney's closet. Yeah right.  
 Hasn't Dick made a difference? Yeah right.  
 Let Paul fly us there. Yeah right.

Who are Rodney, Dick, and Paul? New Zealanders living in the country at the time would know, without need for a gloss, that Rodney is a national politician (a footnote in the book tells us that this jibe was aimed at one of the parliament's most vocal critics), that Dick is mayor of Auckland (and the ad was put up six months after he was elected), and that Paul is a radio personality (the breakfast host on Newstalk ZB, the country's main breakfast show) who owns a plane, which he crashed, and survived. He then got another plane, which he crashed, and survived. So let Paul fly you there? Yeah, right!

Every country has the equivalent of Rodney, Dick, and Paul. In the UK Paul's equivalent would be someone like John Humphrys or Terry Wogan. But I have no idea who the equivalent broadcasting 'anchor' personalities would be in the USA, Canada, or Australia, or – to move away from the major varieties of the past – in France, Germany, or Switzerland – or, at a still more local level, in Paris, Berlin, or Zurich. So, if I encountered such names used by someone speaking English in these parts of the world, I would be at a loss.

And that is what is increasingly happening, as English becomes a local alternative language. When a group of people in a country (such as students, teachers, or businessmen) switch into English, for whatever reason, the subject-matter of their conversation inevitably incorporates aspects of their local environment. They talk about the local shops, streets, suburbs, bus-routes, institutions, businesses, television programmes, newspapers, political parties, minority groups, and a great deal more. They make jokes, quote proverbs, bring up childhood linguistic memories (such as nursery rhymes), and recall lyrics of popular songs. They remember events in the history of their country, or stories from its literature of the past. All this local knowledge is taken for granted, and used in sentences without gloss. Visitors who hear such sentences, or read them in local newspapers, need to have them explained. Conventional dictionaries will not help, for they do not include such localisms, especially if the expressions are encyclopedic in character (referring to local people, places, institutions, and suchlike). People often say that humour doesn't travel. Culture doesn't either.

Every English-speaking location in the world has similar usages which make the English used there distinctive, expressive of local identity, and a means of creating solidarity. From this point of view, notions such as 'French English', 'German English', or 'Swiss English' take on a fresh relevance, going well beyond traditional conceptions of English spoken with one of the Swiss accents, or English displaying interference from French, German, Italian, or Romansch grammar. Swiss English, for example, I define as the kind of English I need to know about when I go to Switzerland, otherwise I will be unable to converse efficiently with Swiss speakers in English. It would be amazingly useful to have a glossary of the English equivalents of Swiss cultural references, but I know of none – and not only for Switzerland. This seems to be a neglected area for any country.



The neglect is especially critical for English, as it increases its global reach. When people from different parts of the world meet each other and use English as a lingua franca (as in a political or business meeting), there are many failures of communication which result from the participants assuming different cultural interpretations of a particular word or phrase. A breakdown may occur in relation to the most everyday of topics. For example, on a recent visit to a small town in the Czech Republic, I had a conversation which went something like this. We were talking about coincidences, and Marina was telling me about Peter, who had just got a job in Marina's office:

Marina: Me and Peter both live in the same street. And what's even more of a coincidence is that he lives in 355 and I live in 356.

Me: So you can wave to each other, then!

Marina (puzzled): No.

Me (confused, thinking that they've perhaps had an argument and weren't talking to each other): I mean, you could keep an eye on each other's house, if one of you was away.

Marina (even more puzzled): Not very easily. I can't see his house from where I live. It's the other end of the street.

Me: But I thought you were neighbours.

Marina: Not really.

Me: Ah.

I didn't know what to say next, and we moved on to some other subject.

The next day I made enquiries, and discovered what had gone wrong. It transpired that the system of house numbering Marina is used to operates on a totally different basis to what I was used to in the UK. In Britain, houses are numbered sequentially in a street, usually with odd numbers down one side and even numbers down the other. So 355 and 356 would probably be opposite each other – or maybe even next to each other (for some streets have linear numbering). But in the Czech Republic (or, at least, in that part where I was), houses are numbered on the basis of when they were built and registered with the housing authority. House number 356 was built (or registered) immediately after house number 355. So it was not necessarily the case that 355 and 356 would even be in the same street, and certainly no expectation that they would be opposite or adjacent to each other. That is why Marina thought it such a coincidence.

It takes a while for the speakers to realize that there is a problem. People readily sense when someone's *linguistic* knowledge is imperfect,

and may go out of their way to accommodate to the foreigner by speaking more slowly or by simplifying sentences. But they are not so good at *cultural* accommodation. There is too ready an assumption that foreigners will know what they are talking about. People always tend to underestimate the cultural knowledge of their non-native listeners and readers, whatever the language and whatever the setting. Because the words and phrases are so familiar and routine, people are usually not aware that they are using something which foreigners will not understand. They take things for granted.

For the most part this behaviour has no serious conversational consequence. If someone says in passing that they did some shopping in a certain part of town (e.g. 'I took the bus into Islington this morning and bought this bag'), and I have no idea where that is, it would be conversationally absurd to interrupt the narrative to enquire exactly where Islington is, given that the speaker's intention is to focus on the bag. The location is of no consequence, and the speaker might have omitted this information without conversational loss. But it would be very different if the sentence had been 'People don't go into X [part of town] in the evenings, as a rule; it can be bit risky'. If you have no idea where X is, then it would pay you to find out.

You might be thinking that this sort of thing happens in other places, but not here in Switzerland, or here in Zurich. You would be wrong. We're not likely to find inexplicitness too often in English-language newspapers in a country, as journalists take care to explain what is going on. But as the situation becomes more informal, approximating to everyday conversation, examples multiply. Here's a random example taken this month [September 2012] from an online forum moaning about traffic in Zurich. I get the impression that there is a problem?

Such things will occur more and more in the foreseeable future. For decades, roads in Switzerland were expanded long after the demand was there. Really courageous ideas like the change from the 30min «Takt» [*what is this, and why in inverted commas?*] to the required 15min «Takt» were refused by an overcautious electorate. But only a train each 15mins is a real and viable alternative to private cars in quite many circumstances. What is described above is what Josef Estermann [*who he?*] forecast more than a decade ago.

There also are silly steps taken by those in charge, like cutting back the S4 Sihltalbahn from Sihlbrugg to Langnau [*why is a cut silly here?*] instead of

extending it over the hill to Zug. Delaying the necessary extension of Tram 7 to at least «Grüt» [*what is this, and why the inverted commas?*] or even [*why 'even'?*] down to Adliswil. Terminating the Tram 12 at Schwamendingen-Stettbach instead of it continuing over into Dübendorf [*why is that a problem?*].

Positive things of course DO happen like the extension of the tram from the Cargo Terminal at the airport to Bassersdorf [*why was that good?*], but such things take a long time. Already ex-Bundesrat [*what is this?*] Leuenberger [*is he well-known?*] opted in favour of A) adding a third lane on each side on major highway-stretches, B) building a highway from the Baden-area (S1) [*a road name?*] over towards Winterthur (without putting all motor-traffic to Zurich), C) completing the «Ostring» [*what is this and why the inverted commas?*] between Uster and Schmerikon. Positive is the construction of the new Bahnhofplatz-extension of Zch-HB [*what is this?*] plus the tunnel to Oerlikon and the expansion of Bhf Oerlikon [*what is this?*], but once again, all this takes quite a while still.

I could make a guess at the answer to some of these questions, and it would only take a short time living in the city for many of the questions to disappear. But my point is to draw attention to the amount of cultural knowledge assumed in an everyday piece of conversation. The place-names, personal names, and abbreviations are obviously the main difficulty, but there are also value-judgements which go over my head – such as the stories behind 'silly' and 'positive', and the issue which led to the use of 'even' – and the significance of the inverted commas totally escapes me. There are 238 words in this extract, and about 10 per cent of them are opaque to the outsider. This is quite high compared with what we might find in a discussion of, say, holidays, but quite low compared with what we would encounter in, say, a political discussion (where the names of politicians and parties, including their nicknames, would be bandied about). And the greater the cultural distance between the writer/speaker and the reader/hearer, the more these totals would increase. Nor must we forget the temporal dimension: this paper has been synchronic in its focus, but when we include a diachronic dimension (such as understanding the language of Shakespeare) we encounter an analogous cultural distance.

I've spent some time on this fourth kind of 'sense' because as English comes to be increasingly used in countries with hugely different cultural histories, this kind of cultural communicative misunderstanding is going to become increasingly frequent. But all four kinds of 'sense' discussed so far in this paper are important, as each of them – lexical/grammatical, pragmatic, stylistic, and cultural – is part of the language system, whether

used by the community as a whole or by groups within the community. By contrast, my fifth (and final) perspective on 'sense' is a matter of *individual differences*. We all know that we need to pay attention, if we hope to understand. And we all know that a lack of concentration can lead to a problem of understanding which, on a different occasion, would present us with no difficulty. Language even provides us with expressions that enable us to explain personal inadequacy, whether perceived as temporary or permanent. Anyone who says 'I don't understand. I think it must be me', is illustrating this condition. As are those who, as a late-evening conversation gets complicated, say 'Tell me in the morning'. Or those who, at a difficult point in an exposition, say 'I need a drink'. Speakers, of course, need to recognize the existence of individual differences, and as they see the eyes glaze around a room, make a note to stop talking. As I do now.

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