

## UNIT 3 REFERENCE AND SENSE

**Entry requirements** SENTENCES, UTTERANCES, and PROPOSITIONS (Unit 2). If you feel you understand these notions, take the entry test below.

**Entry test** Answer the following:

- (1) State which of the following represents an utterance (*U*) and which a sentence (*S*):  
*John sang wonderfully last night* *S / U*  
'John sang wonderfully last night' *S / U*
- (2) Can a sentence be true or false? *Yes / No*
- (3) Is an utterance tied to a particular time and place? *Yes / No*
- (4) Is a sentence tied to a particular time and place? *Yes / No*
- (5) Can a proposition be said to be in any particular language? *Yes / No*
- (6) Can an utterance be true or false? *Yes / No*

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**Feedback** (1) *S, U* (2) *Yes* (3) *Yes* (4) *No* (5) *No* (6) *Yes*  
If you have scored less than 5 correct out of 6, you should review Unit 2.  
If you have scored at least 5 correct out of 6, continue to the introduction.

**Introduction** This unit explains some further basic notions in semantics. It is important that you master these notions from the outset as they will keep recurring throughout the course.

**Comment** On this page and the following ones, you will learn the difference between two quite distinct ways of talking about the meaning of words and other expressions. In talking of sense, we deal with relationships inside the language; in talking of reference we deal with the relationships between language and the world.

**Definition** By means of reference, a speaker indicates which things in the world (including persons) are being talked about.

**Example** My son is in the beech tree

↓                      ↓

identifies          identifies

person              thing

As a further example, the second and third words of the ‘comment’ paragraph above form the phrase *this page*. The phrase *this page* is a part of the English language. The phrase, when it was used in the ‘comment’ paragraph above, actually identified a particular sheet of paper, something that you could take between your finger and thumb, a little part of the world. The actual page, the sheet of paper, is not a part of the English language, since languages are not made of pieces of paper.

**Comment** So we have two things: the English expression *this page* (part of the language) and the thing you could hold between your finger and thumb (part of the world). We call the relationship between them ‘reference’. That is, in the previous ‘comment’ paragraph, *this page* refers to the physical sheet of paper numbered 26.

**Practice** Before answering these questions you should carry out the following simple instruction:

touch your left ear.

(1) Write down the last three words in the above instruction.

.....

(2) Is the thing you touched a part of the world or a part of the language?

.....

(3) Is your answer to (1) a part of the language? Yes / No

(4) If you say to your mother ‘There’s a wasp on your left ear’, does ‘your left ear’ here refer to the thing you touched in response to a previous question? Yes / No

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**Feedback** (1) your left ear (2) A part of the world, languages do not have ears.  
(3) Yes (4) No, it refers to your mother’s left ear.

**Comment** In the present circumstances, *your left ear* refers to the thing you touched in response to (1) above. We say that your left ear is the referent of the phrase *your left ear*: reference is a relationship between parts of a language and things outside the language (in the world).

The same expression can, in some cases, be used to refer to different things. There are as many potential referents for the phrase *your left ear* as there are people in the world with left ears. Likewise there are as many potential referents for the phrase *this page* as there are pages in the world. Thus some (in fact very many) expressions in a language can have variable reference.

- Practice (1) What would be the referent of the phrase *the present President of the United States* used:
- (a) in 2007?.....
- (b) in 1996?.....
- (2) Therefore we can say that the phrase *the present President of the United States* has  
.....
- (3) What would be the referent of the phrase *the President of the United States* used in a conversation about:
- (a) United States politics in 2007? .....
- (b) United States politics in 1996? .....
- (4) In the light of the preceding questions, does the reference of an expression vary according to (a) the circumstances (time, place, etc.) in which the expression is used, or (b) the topic of the conversation in which the expression is used, or (c) both (a) and (b)? Circle your choice.

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Feedback (1) (a) George W. Bush (b) Bill Clinton (2) variable reference (3)(a) George W. Bush (b) Bill Clinton (4) (c)

Comment There are cases of expressions which in normal everyday conversation never refer to different things, i.e. in most everyday situations that one can envisage, have constant reference.

- Practice Imagine two different everyday situations in which separate couples are having separate conversations about what they refer to with the phrase *the moon*.
- (1) Would they be talking about the same object  
(i.e. does *the moon* normally have constant reference)? Yes / No
- (2) Does *The People's Republic of China* normally have  
constant reference? Yes / No
- (3) Does *Angola* normally have constant reference? Yes / No
- (4) Does *Halley's Comet* normally have constant reference? Yes / No

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Feedback (1) Yes (2) Yes (3) Yes (4) Yes

Comment In fact, there is very little constancy of reference in language. In everyday discourse almost all of the fixing of reference comes from the context in which expressions are used. Two different expressions can have the same referent. The classic example is *the Morning Star* and *the Evening Star*, both of which normally refer to the planet Venus.

- Practice**
- (1) In a conversation about the United States of America in 2007 can *the President* and the *Leader of the Republican Party* have the same referent? Yes / No
- (2) If we are talking about a situation in which John is standing alone in the corner, can *John* have the same referent as *the person in the corner*? Yes / No

**Feedback** (1) Yes (2) Yes

**Definition** To turn from reference to sense, the SENSE of an expression is its place in a system of semantic relationships with other expressions in the language. The first of these semantic relationships that we will mention is sameness of meaning, an intuitive concept which we will illustrate by example. We will deal first with the senses of words in context.

- Practice** Say whether the pairs of words in the curly brackets in the sentences below have approximately the same meaning (S) or a different meaning (D).
- (1) I { *almost* / *nearly* } fell over S / D
- (2) It is { *likely* / *probable* } that Raymond will be here tomorrow S / D
- (3) Your gatepost doesn't seem to be quite { *vertical* / *upright* } S / D
- (4) He painted the fireplace { *aquamarine* / *vermilion* } S / D
- (5) I'll see you on { *Wednesday* / *Thursday* } S / D

**Feedback** (1) S (2) S (3) S (4) D (5) D

**Comment** We can talk about the sense, not only of words, but also of longer expressions such as phrases and sentences.

- Practice** Intuitively, do the following pairs mean the same or nearly the same thing?
- (1) *Rupert took off his jacket*  
*Rupert took his jacket off* Yes / No
- (2) *Harriet wrote the answer down*  
*Harriet wrote down the answer* Yes / No
- (3) *Bachelors prefer redheads*  
*Girls with red hair are preferred by unmarried men* Yes / No

**Feedback** (1) Yes (2) Yes (3) Yes (You may not have agreed, but it's not too important, as we are dealing with a quite rough-and-ready concept at this stage. Try to see the ways our answers fit the questions.)

**Comment** In some cases, the same word can have more than one sense.

**Practice** Does the word *bank* have the same meaning in the following sentence pairs?

(1) *I have an account at the Bank of Scotland*  
*We steered the raft to the other bank of the river* Yes / No

(2) *The DC-10 banked sharply to avoid a crash*  
*I banked the furnace up with coke last night* Yes / No

**Feedback** (1) No (2) No, we say that *bank* has a number of different senses (at least 4).

**Comment** We use the term ‘word’ here in the sense of ‘word-form’. That is, we find it convenient to treat anything spelled with the same sequence of letters and pronounced with the same sequence of phonemes (distinctive sounds) in a standard dialect as being the same word. Thus, for example, we treat *bank* in the practice above as a single word with many senses. This is the way most non-semanticists use the term ‘word’. We mention this because some semanticists, including almost all compilers of dictionaries, would regard *bank*, for example, as several different words. In an ordinary dictionary there are several different entries for the word *bank*, sometimes distinguished by a subscript, e.g. *bank*<sub>1</sub>, *bank*<sub>2</sub>, etc. No confusion will arise from our relatively non-technical use of the term ‘word’. This matter will be taken up again in a later unit, when we discuss HOMONYMY and POLYSEMY (Unit 11).

One sentence can have different senses too, as the following practice section illustrates.

**Practice** (1) Write down two sentences bringing out clearly the two different meanings of *The chicken is ready to eat*.

.....  
 .....

(2) Write down two sentences bringing out clearly the two different senses of *He greeted the girl with a smile*.

.....  
 .....

(3) Do likewise for *He turned over the field*.

.....  
 .....

**Feedback** (1) The chicken is ready to be eaten vs The chicken is ready to eat something (2) Smiling, he greeted the girl vs He greeted the smiling girl (3) He changed direction over the field vs He turned the field over (where *he* = a pilot or *he* = a ploughman or a farmer)

**Comment** On the relationship between sense and reference: the referent of an expression is often a thing or a person in the world; whereas the sense of an expression is not a thing at all. In fact, it is difficult to say what sort of entity the sense of an expression is. Intuitively, it is sometimes useful to think of sense as that part of the meaning of an expression that is left over when reference is factored out. It is much easier to say whether or not two expressions have the same sense. (Like being able to say that two people are in the same place without being able to say where they are.) The sense of an expression is an abstraction, but it is helpful to note that it is an abstraction that can be entertained in the mind of a language user. When a person understands fully what is said to him, it is reasonable to say that he grasps the sense of the expressions he hears.

**Rule** Every expression that has meaning has sense, but not every expression has reference.

**Practice** Do the following words refer to things in the world?

- |                     |                 |
|---------------------|-----------------|
| (1) <i>almost</i>   | <i>Yes / No</i> |
| (2) <i>probable</i> | <i>Yes / No</i> |
| (3) <i>and</i>      | <i>Yes / No</i> |
| (4) <i>if</i>       | <i>Yes / No</i> |
| (5) <i>above</i>    | <i>Yes / No</i> |

**Feedback** None of the above words refers to a thing in the world. Nevertheless all these words, *almost*, *probable*, *and*, *if*, and *above* have some sense.

- Practice** (1) When you look up the meaning of a word in a dictionary, what do you find there, its referent, or an expression with the same sense?  
 .....
- (2) Is a dictionary full of words or full of things, like a box or a sack?  
 .....
- (3) Could a foreigner learn the meanings of his very first words of English by having their typical referents pointed out to him? *Yes / No*
- (4) Could a foreigner learn the meanings of his very first words of English by looking them up in an English dictionary? *Yes / No*

**Feedback** (1) an expression with the same sense (2) full of words (3) Yes (4) No

**Comment** There is something essentially circular about the set of definitions in a dictionary. Similarly, defining the senses of words and other expressions often has something of this circular nature. This is not necessarily a bad thing, and in any case it is often unavoidable, since in many cases (e.g. cases of expressions that have no referents: *and*, etc.) there is no way of indicating the meaning of an expression except with other words.

Just as there is something grammatically complete about a whole sentence, as opposed to a smaller expression such as a phrase or a single word, there is something semantically complete about a proposition, as opposed to the sense of a phrase or single word. One might say, roughly, that a proposition corresponds to a complete independent thought.

**Practice** Are the senses of the following expressions propositions?

- |  |          |
|--|----------|
| (1) <i>Johnny has got a new teacher</i>                                      | Yes / No |
| (2) <i>A new teacher</i> (not understood as an elliptical sentence-fragment) | Yes / No |
| (3) <i>Johnny</i> (not understood as an elliptical sentence-fragment)        | Yes / No |
| (4) <i>This is the house that Jack built</i>                                 | Yes / No |

**Feedback** (1) Yes (2) No (3) No (4) Yes

**Comment** To the extent that perfect translation between languages is possible (and this is a very debatable point, as mentioned earlier), essentially the same sense can be said to belong to expressions in different languages.

- Practice**
- |  |          |
|--|----------|
| (1) Do <i>M. Berger s'est rasé ce matin</i> and <i>M. Berger shaved himself this morning</i> express the same proposition? | Yes / No |
| (2) Do the two sentences in (1) have the same sense?   | Yes / No |
| (3) Do the expressions <i>ce matin</i> and <i>this morning</i> have the same sense?  | Yes / No |
| (4) Do the expressions <i>s'est rasé</i> and <i>shaved himself</i> have the same sense?                                    | Yes / No |
| (5) Does <i>ein unverheirateter Mann</i> have the same sense as <i>an unmarried man</i> ?                                  | Yes / No |

**Feedback** (1) Yes, perhaps. One might well object, however, that *s'est rasé* in French is not a perfect translation of *shaved*, since it could also be rendered as *has shaved*. (2) Yes, with the same reservations as for question (1). (3) Yes (4) Perhaps (5) Yes, assuming that *unverheiratet* in German has essentially the same meaning as *unmarried* in English.

**Comment** Just as one can talk of the same sense in different languages, so one can talk of expressions in different dialects of one language as having the same sense.

- Practice**
- (1) Do *pavement* in British English and *sidewalk* in American English have the same sense? Yes / No
  - (2) Do *pal* and *chum* have the same sense? Yes / No
  - (3) Can expressions with entirely different social connotations have the same sense? For example, can the following have the same sense?  
*People walking in close spatio-temporal proximity*  
*People walking near each other* Yes / No

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**Feedback** (1) Yes (2) Yes (3) Yes

**Comment** The relationship between reference and utterance is not so direct as that between sense and proposition, but there is a similarity worth pointing out. Both referring and uttering are acts performed by particular speakers on particular occasions.

**Practice** Imagine that a friend of yours says to you, 'John is putting on weight these days', and imagine that a friend of ours (i.e. the authors of this book) happens to utter the same sentence to us one day.

(1) Would this be a case of one utterance or two?

.....

(2) Would the John referred to be the same John or two different Johns?

.....

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**Feedback** (1) two (2) almost certainly, two different Johns

**Comment** In the two separate utterances above, there are two separate acts of referring. In fact, most utterances contain, or are accompanied by, one or more acts of referring. An act of referring is the picking out of a particular referent by a speaker in the course of a particular utterance.

Although the concept of reference is fundamentally related to utterances, in that acts of reference only actually happen in the course of utterances, we will find it useful to stretch a point and talk about reference in connection with sentences, or parts of sentences. What we are really doing in cases like this is imagining a potential utterance of the sentence or expression in question.

In everyday conversation the words *meaning*, *means*, *mean*, *meant*, etc. are sometimes used to indicate reference and sometimes to indicate sense.

**Practice** What is intended by the word *mean, meaning*, etc. in the following examples, reference (R) or sense (S)?

- |  |       |
|--|-------|
| (1) When Helen mentioned 'the fruit cake', she meant that<br>rock-hard object in the middle of the table | R / S |
| (2) When Albert talks about 'his former friend' he means me  | R / S |
| (3) Daddy, what does <i>unique</i> mean?   | R / S |
| (4) <i>Purchase</i> has the same meaning as <i>buy</i>   | R / S |
| (5) Look up the meaning of <i>apoplexy</i> in your dictionary  | R / S |
| (6) If you look out of the window now, you'll see who I mean   | R / S |

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**Feedback** (1) R (2) R (3) S (4) S (5) S (6) R

**Comment** The study of sense demands, as you may have noticed, a degree of idealization of the facts about meaning. In other words, sometimes we claim to be more certain than we perhaps should be about questions like 'Does this expression have the same sense as that one?' It is worth going along with this idealization. We will not let it lead us astray unduly. In later units we will deal with some problems with the notion of sense.

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**Summary** The notions of sense and reference are central to the study of meaning. Every further unit in this book will make use of one or another of these notions. The idea of reference is relatively solid and easy to understand. The idea of sense is more elusive: it's a bit like electricity, which we all know how to use (and even talk about) in various ways, without ever being sure what exactly it is. Even semanticists aren't sure exactly what sense is, but you'll find that your grasp of it and your appreciation of the usefulness of the concept will grow as you study more. (The importance of the sense/reference distinction was most influentially demonstrated by the German philosopher Gottlob Frege.)

### **Unit 3** Study Guide and Exercises

**Directions** After you have read Unit 3 you should be able to tackle the following questions to test your understanding of the main ideas raised in the unit.

- 1 You should understand these terms and concepts from this unit:

sense	context
reference	dialect
referent	proposition
- 2 Can different expressions have the same referent? Give an example not found in this unit.
- 3 Can the same expression have different referents? Give an example not found in this unit.

- 4 Give an example of an expression not found in this unit that has an invariable referent and of one that has no referent.
- 5 Explain this sentence from this unit in your own words: 'Every expression that has meaning has sense, but not every expression has reference'.
- 6 Characterize a typical dictionary definition of a word. Does the definition include everything a typical native speaker knows about the word's meaning? Is it possible to write such an entry which is complete?  
Comment on the following examples, making reference to concepts introduced in this unit.
- 7 *the Evening Star / the Morning Star*
- 8 *the President of the United States / the Commander-in-Chief / the Leader of the Republican Party*
- 9 *Visiting relatives can be boring*
- 10 *the planet Mars*
- 11 *Smoking grass can be dangerous*