ABSTRACT. A theory of *radical interpretation* gives the meanings of all sentences of a language, and can be verified by evidence available to someone who does not understand the language. Such evidence cannot include detailed information concerning the beliefs and intentions of speakers, and therefore the theory must simultaneously interpret the utterances of speakers and specify (some of) his beliefs. Analogies and connections with decision theory suggest the kind of theory that will serve for radical interpretation, and how permissible evidence can support it.

Meaning and belief play interlocking and complementary roles in the interpretation of speech. By emphasizing the connection between our grounds for attributing beliefs to speakers, and our grounds for assigning meanings to their utterances, I hope to explain some problematic features both of belief and of meaning.

We interpret a bit of linguistic behavior when we say what a speaker’s words mean on an occasion of use. The task may be seen as one of re-description. We know that the words ‘Es schneit’ have been uttered on a particular occasion and we want to redescribe this uttering as an act of saying that it is snowing. What do we need to know if we are to be in a position to redescribe speech in this way, that is, to interpret the utterances of a speaker? Since a competent interpreter can interpret any of a potential infinity of utterances (or so we may as well say), we cannot specify what he knows by listing cases. He knows, for example, that in uttering ‘Es schneit’ under certain conditions and with a certain intent, Karl has said that it is snowing; but there are endless further cases. What we must do then is state a finite theory from which particular interpretations follow. There is no need to insist that all interpreters know the theory: it is enough if they know the required consequences. The theory may thus be used to describe an aspect of the interpreter’s competence at understanding what is said. We may, if we please, also maintain that there is a mechanism in the interpreter that corresponds to the theory. If this means only that there is some mechanism or other that performs that task, it is hard to see how the claim can fail to be true, and no testable weight is added to the theory.

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Theory of interpretation is the business jointly of the linguist, psychologist and philosopher. Its subject matter is the behavior of a speaker or speakers, and it tells what certain of their utterances mean. Finally, the theory can be used to describe what every interpreter knows, namely a specifiable infinite subset of the truths of the theory. In what follows, I shall say a little, and assume a lot, about the form a theory of interpretation can take. But I want to focus on the question how we can tell that any such theory is true.

One answer comes pat. The theory is true if its empirical implications are true; we can test the theory by sampling its implications for truth. In the present case, this means noticing whether or not typical interpretations a theory yields for the utterances of a speaker are correct. We agreed that any competent interpreter knows whether the relevant implications are true; so any competent interpreter can test a theory in this way. This does not mean, of course, that finding a true theory is trivial; it does mean that given a theory, testing it may require nothing arcane.

The original question, however, is how we know that a particular interpretation is correct, and our pat answer is not addressed to this question. An utterance can no doubt be interpreted by a correct theory, but if the problem is to determine when an interpretation is correct, it is no help to support the theory that yields it by giving samples of correct interpretations. There is an apparent impass; we need the theory before we can recognize evidence in its behalf.

The problem is salient because uninterpreted utterances seem the appropriate evidential base for a theory of meaning. If an acceptable theory could be supported by such evidence, that would constitute conceptual progress, for the theory would be specifically semantical in nature, while the evidence would be described in non-semantic terms. An attempt to build on even more elementary evidence, say behavioristic evidence, could only make the task of theory construction harder, though it might make it more satisfying. In any case, we can without embarrassment undertake the lesser enterprise.

A central source of trouble is the way beliefs and meanings conspire to account for utterances. A speaker who holds a sentence to be true on an occasion does so in part because of what he means, or would mean, by an utterance of that sentence, and in part because of what he believes. If all we have to go on is the fact of honest utterance, we cannot infer the belief