Metalanguage of Semantics

Like any other branch of linguistics, semantics deals with the words, phrases and sentences with which we communicate. But for semantics the immediate objects of study are not these words, phrases and sentences themselves, in the sense of the sounds, sequences of letters or hand signs which we utter or perform and can then write down or record. As the study of meaning, semantics is interested in something which cannot be perceived directly through our senses, but which, in one way or another, we *experience* in using and thinking about language. We cannot see, hear or touch a word's meaning: meanings are things we understand. It is not meanings that go between speaker and hearer: the only things that are transferred from one speaker to the other are sound waves in the air. This means that in order to get started in semantics, we need a way of identifying meanings and bringing them to light in an unambiguous way so that

we can begin to study them.

The main way in which we normally reveal the meanings of linguistic expressions is, quite simply, by describing them in language. But since it is language that we're interested in the first place, we need to distinguish between the language *whose* meanings we want to describe and the language *in which* we couch the descriptions. The language whose meanings we are describing is called the **object language**. The language in which we describe these meanings is called the **metalanguage**.

The lexical resources of any language are limited: at some point, the metalanguage definitions will *have* to include object language terms, and thereby introduce circularity. We can continue to refine our definitions and search out the most precise and explanatory ways of couching them, but in contenting ourselves with this task we will not have provided any account of what the meanings we are defining actually are, nor of how they relate to any of the three points of the semiotic triangle. In particular, we will have left it completely obscure what it is for a speaker to understand the meaning of a word.

Most everyday, non-technical, words and expessions in all natural languages are like the noun 'meaning' or the verb 'mean' in that they have several meanings which cannot always be sharply distinguished from one another (or alternatively a range of meaning within which several distinctions can be drawn) and may be somewhat vague or indeterminate.

The property by virtue of which a language may be used to refer to itself (in whole or in part) I will call **reflexivity.** Philosophical problems that can be caused by this kind of reflexivity will not be of direct concern to us here.

But if we are aiming for precision and clarity, English, like other natural languages, cannot be used for metalinguistic purposes without modification. As far as the metalinguistic vocabulary of natural languages is concerned, there are two kinds of modification open to us: **regimentation** and **extension.**

We can take existing everyday words, such as 'language', 'sentence', 'word', 'meaning' or 'sense', and subject them to strict control (i.e., **regiment** their use),

defining them orre-defining them for our own purposes (just as physicists re-define 'force' or 'energy5 for their specialized purposes). Alternatively, we can **extend** the everyday vocabulary by introducing into it technical terms which are not normally used in everyday discourse.

In our regimentation of ordinary written English for metalinguistic purposes, it will be useful to establish a number of notational conventions, which will enable us to refer unambiguously to a variety of linguistic units. Such more or less ordinary notational conventions as are employed metalinguistically in this book (italics, quotation marks, etc.)

The terms object-language and metalanguage are correlative, in the sense that the one depends upon the other. As we saw in the preceding section, we have to use language to talk about or describe language. Instead of using a given language, reflexively, in order to describe itself, we can employ one language to describe another. In this case, we may say that the language being described is the object-language and the language which is used to make the descriptive statements is the metalanguage.

The metalanguage will then normally contain terms for identifying and referring to the elements of the object-language (words, sounds or letters, etc.) and, in addition, a certain number of special technical terms which can be used to describe the relations between these elements, how they may be combined to form phrases and sentences, and so on.