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Since the 1950s it has often been claimed by philosophers of language that ‘it is people who mean, not expressions’ (Strawson 1950, p. 328). Philosophy of language, however, is predominantly philosophy of the *English* language, and like any language, English has its fair share of oddities and exotic features, some of which may be philosophically relevant. The grammar of ‘meaning’ is one of these exotic features of the English languages, and one that is quite relevant to the aforementioned claim. In comparison to its translation equivalents in many other languages, the English word ‘meaning’ is, *at least in theory* (but as it will turn out, not in practice), exceptionally polysemous because of the lack of two distinctions in English that are commonly made in most other European languages. The first of these distinctions is lexical, the second morphological.<sup>1</sup>

The noun ‘meaning’ is a nominalization of the verb ‘to mean’.<sup>2</sup> The missing morphological distinction, which we will discuss later, concerns this nominalization, but the missing lexical distinction is more easily illustrated

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<sup>1</sup> The grammar of ‘meaning’ has been analyzed before by Stampe (1968). However, illustrating the English language dominance in philosophy of language, his perspective was solely *from within* English grammar, and because of that he missed the point that I will attempt to make in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> The same is the case in most – if not all – other European languages. There are other languages, however, that use different grammatical constructions. A quite

by looking at the base verb ‘to mean’ itself. English ‘to mean’ can take two very different kinds of grammatical subjects: *agents* and *signs*. Agents are persons, and in some cases animals or machines (such as computers); signs include words and sentences, but also events, states of affairs, or ‘things’ taken to be a sign of something (note that Grice’s ‘natural meaning’, and ‘to mean to’ (do) will be ignored here). For example:

- (1) In Japanese, ‘tabun’ means ‘probably’.
- (2) With ‘tabun’, mister Satō means ‘no’.

In (1), the subject of the sentence is a word, a type of sign, while in (2), the subject is a person, an agent. There also is a sign in (2), ‘tabun’, but it is mere oblique argument there, like ‘in Japanese’ in (1) (and consequently that sentence fragment can be deleted without making the sentence ungrammatical; we will return to this later).

In most other European languages, (1) and (2) cannot be expressed with the same verb. Other Germanic, and Slavic languages use different verbs in (1) and (2). In German for example, a person ‘meint’ and a word ‘bedeutet’. Like English ‘to mean’, German ‘meinen’ derives from *\*meino-*, Proto-Indo-European for intention or opinion. Romance languages, on the other hand, seem to lack a derivation of *\*meino-* and use constructions that could be literally translated as ‘want to say’.<sup>3</sup> For ‘to mean’ as in (1), both Germanic and Romance languages tend to use a variant and/or verbalization of a translation equivalent of (to) ‘sign’. For example, ‘betekenen’ in Dutch and ‘signifier’ in French. However, the English etymological equivalent ‘signify’ is rarely an appropriate translation for these words.

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common alternative is that the base word is a noun rather than a verb. In Japanese, for example, the abstract noun ‘imi’ (意味 – meaning) is basic and the recently introduced Anglicism ‘imi-suru’ (意味する – to mean) is a verbalization of that noun.

<sup>3</sup> In Japanese, because the root noun (see note 1) can not be used in translation of (2), a construction similar to that in Romance language is used. However, it should be noted that, under the influence of English, it has become more or less acceptable recently to use the verbalization ‘imi-suru’ in translations of both (1) and (2).

In addition to the missing lexical distinction between *agent-meaning* (meaning of a person or agent; 'to mean' as 'intent of communication')<sup>3</sup> and *sign-meaning* (meaning of a word or sign; 'to mean' as 'signification'), English also misses a morphological distinction between two relevant kinds of nominalization that tend to be morphologically distinct in other Germanic and in Romance languages. These two kinds are *inflectional* and *derivational* nominalization. Nominalization is often considered to be derivational by definition because it changes the syntactic category of a word (part of speech), but there are a number of other relevant features for the categorization of morphological features as derivational or inflectional (see also Haspelmath 1996). Most important are creativity and regularity. Derivational morphology is 'creative' in the sense that it creates new lexemes, words that cannot be derived from (just) the root word, or that add semantic elements to the root word. Inflectional morphology is non-creative. And while inflectional morphology tends to be highly regular, derivational morphology usually is not. Furthermore, aside from the grammatical difference, the different kinds of nominalization are *ontologically* different as well – inflectional nominalizations are *events* or occurents and derivational nominalizations are (abstract) *objects* or endurants.

*Inflectional nominalization* is almost always formed with the *-ing* suffix in English<sup>4</sup> (and is usually called the 'gerund'), and is morphologically identical to the infinitive (aside from the addition of an article) in other Germanic languages. The resulting (non-creative) noun refers to the event, activity or process of what is expressed by the verb ('she won because her swimming was fast'). The *direct* inflectional nominalization is a *count noun* referring to a concrete event (etc.), but it can be generalized (like most nouns) into an abstract, *indirect* form by turning it into a *mass noun*. Such indirect inflectional nominalizations refer either to the phenomenon of that event, activity or process (more) in general ('swimming gets you wet'); or to the ability to do what is expressed by the verb ('he learned swimming when he was five'). In actual usage, these abstract forms are much more common than the direct inflectional nominalization.

There are three main forms of *derivational nominalization* in English and

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<sup>4</sup> There are (possibly) a few exceptions to this rule. For example, 'murder' and 'use' (although the non-creativity of these is debatable).

other Germanic languages. The first generally ends in *-er* and is used to refer to actors ('the swimmer'); the second is morphologically identical to the past perfect and is used for (grammatical) objects of past actions ('the given'); the third is rather irregular in English, but tends to end in *-ung* or *-ing* in German or Dutch, and refers to some kind of (non-grammatical) objects (or objectives), products or results of actions or further extensions thereof (and is, therefore, sometimes confusingly similar to the second form).

It is this third form that is of interest here. In English this type of nominalization is usually formed either by means of a suffix such as *-ing* ('the drawing'), *-(at)ion* ('the translation'), or *-ance* ('the performance'); or by using the stem ('the talk'). Of all forms of nominalization this is the most creative one. 'A reading' and 'accounting' are cases of considerable creativity ('a reading', is an interpretation more than an object of reading, and (the profession of) 'accounting' involves the activity and results of doing accounting, but much more than that), but even a seemingly straightforward case such as 'drawing' turns out to be rather creative when different nominalizations are compared. Take for example the sentence 'she draws a house' and its derivational nominalizations of the second and third type mentioned above: 'the *drawn* is a house' versus 'the *drawing* shows a house'. While 'the drawn' is mere (grammatical) object of the past action of drawing and does not have any properties beyond those of that activity, 'the drawing' is (creates) a new kind of 'thing' with new properties, (including the material used to draw on, and the ability to 'show' something, for example).<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, there are other differences in possible usage between these two forms.<sup>6</sup>

English nominalizations ending in *-ing* can either be inflectional (gerunds) or derivational (of the third kind distinguished above). Consequently, for many verbs, the *-ing* form is potentially ambiguous. However, if there is

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<sup>5</sup> It is possible in principle to use 'is' in the second sentence, but the resulting sentence, 'the drawing is a house', is rather unnatural because 'is' seems to suggest a identity relationship here. That 'is' does not suggest the same thing in the first sentence, is because 'drawn' and 'house' clearly belong to different ontological categories ('house' is a material object, 'drawn' is not), while 'house' and 'drawing' belong to the same ontological category (of material objects).

<sup>6</sup> For example, 'she draws a drawing' is non-informative, but 'she draws the drawn' is a tautology; and 'the goat ate the drawing' is unfortunate, but 'the goat ate the drawn' is nonsense.

a common derivational nominalization ending in *-ing*, the direct inflectional nominalization (event or activity) requires explicit disambiguation. In such cases the *-ing* form is hardly, if ever, used as direct inflectional nominalization to express the activity (but it may be used to express the phenomenon or ability). For example, although 'drawing' in 'her drawing was beautiful' is strictly speaking ambiguous, it will in almost all cases be understood as derivational rather than inflectional nominalization (product rather than activity); and to express that there is beauty in the activity, another expression – usually avoiding nominalization altogether – would (have to) be used. If unspecified as such, a 'drawing' is rarely – if ever – a concrete event of someone drawing, although grammatically it could be. The same is true for 'meaning'. Grammatically it could be an event, activity or process, but because there is a common derivational nominalization 'meaning' (that what is meant), it is always that derivational nominalization that takes priority.

The (common) interpretative options of the word 'meaning' are further restricted by the lack of a nominalization of agent-meaning (in ordinary language). The nominalization of a verb in a subject-verb-object sentence resembles a two-place predicate in which the original subject and object become modifiers (usually genitives) in a noun phrase with the nominalization as the head noun – 'John draws a house' becomes 'John's drawing of a house', and 'Joan eats a sandwich' becomes 'Joan's eating of a sandwich'. (Note that it is often more natural to use at least one preposition (usually 'of' or 'by') rather than a genitive.) Instead of a single noun phrase, a sentence can be constructed by adding a copula and moving the original subject into complement position, although the result is rather unnatural in case of inflectional nominalizations. For example, derivational nominalization: 'the drawing of a house is John's'; and inflectional nominalization: 'the eating of a sandwich is Joan's'.

In case of copulative verbs and other verbs that have subject complements or complement clauses rather than objects as arguments, it is often – or always in case of copulas – the verbal phrase consisting of the (copulative) verb and complement as a whole that is nominalized rather than just the (copulative) verb itself (which is also possible, but less common, for verbs that have an object as an argument) – 'seems happy' becomes 'seeming happy' and cannot be split up. Consequently, the complement of a copula

cannot remain in complement position after nominalization – ‘John seems happy’ cannot be converted into ‘John’s seeming is happy’, but ‘the seeming happy is John’s’ is possible, although unnatural. Non-copulative verbs that have complements rather than objects as arguments are generally (but not in all cases) more flexible in this respect, although the resulting nominalizations are often (very) unnatural – ‘Joan thinks that blue is a color’ can be converted into either ‘Joan’s thinking is that blue is a color’ or ‘the thinking that blue is a color is Joan’s’, but neither sentence really sounds like ‘proper’ English.

The verb ‘to mean’ falls in this latter category of verbs with complements as arguments. In case of *sign-meaning* as in sentence (1), it functions similar to ‘thinking’ in the last example. If we ignore the oblique argument ‘in Japanese’ and for readability also the quotes in sentence (1) we get ‘tabun means probably’, which can be converted into ‘tabun’s meaning is probably’ or ‘the meaning probably is tabun’s’ (if ‘means probably’ is nominalized as a whole into ‘meaning probably’).

Nominalization in case of *agent-meaning* as in sentence (2) is more irregular. If we again ignore the oblique argument and the quotes we get ‘mister Satō means no’, which, by the same pattern as sign-meaning, should be convertible into (a) ‘mister Satō’s meaning is no’ or (b) ‘the meaning no is mister Satō’s’ (if ‘means no’ is nominalized as a whole into ‘meaning no’). However, (a) is wrong (although possibly correct but rather unnatural if it is rewritten as ‘the meaning *by* mister Satō is no’) and (b), although *possibly* grammatically ‘legal’, is surely *very* uncommon. In fact, in nominalizing sentence (2), the *oblique* argument ‘with tabun’ can *not* be ignored – ‘with tabun, mister Satō means no’ becomes (c) ‘the meaning of mister Satō’s tabun is no’.

Effectively, English lacks a nominalization of agent-meaning (except possibly in (b) and the rewritten version of (a), provided that these sentences are accepted as proper English sentences). ‘Meaning’ in (c) is meaning of ‘no’, thus sign-meaning. When nominalizing the verb ‘to mean’, the resulting noun ‘*meaning*’ is *always sign-meaning*. Consequently, the philosophical concept of ‘speaker meaning’ is not agent-meaning (as the term suggests), but sign-meaning of the speaker’s utterance. And although Strawson (1950) rejected ‘to [sign-]mean’ in favor of ‘to [agent-]mean’ (‘it is people who mean, not expressions’; p. 328), forced by the limitations of the

English language, he ended up defining sign-meaning rather than agent-meaning.<sup>7</sup> Even if speakers mean, rather than expressions, only expressions, rather than speakers, *have meaning*.

Derivational ‘meaning’, either sign-meaning or the hypothetical, missing agent-meaning is that what is meant, the complement clause of the verb ‘to mean’. As such, it is one of that verb’s two obligatory arguments, the other one being the subject, which can be either agent or sign. Additionally, the verb can have a number of oblique arguments. What is grammatically optional, however, may be pragmatically (and/or semantically) obligatory.

In English grammar, the verb ‘to mean’ is a two-place predicate MEAN(SUBJECT,D-MEANING) with two possible variants of SUBJECT: AGENT and SIGN. In (2) the AGENT (mister Satō) fills the SUBJECT slot, and the SIGN (‘tabun’) is an oblique argument. In (1) the SIGN (‘tabun’) fills the SUBJECT slot, and there is an oblique argument ‘in Japanese’. Additionally, in (1) there could – in principle – also be an AGENT as an oblique argument, and in either sentence further specifications of context could be added as further oblique arguments. If we use Wittgenstein’s notion of a ‘*language game*’ as a shorthand term for occasion, context, and type of sign used, then a complemented *four-place* predicate MEAN’ would be:

MEAN’(AGENT\*,SIGN\*,D-MEANING,LANGUAGE-GAME\*\*),

such that (\*) of AGENT and SIGN one is obligatory (and fills the SUBJECT slot) and the other is an optional, oblique argument, and that (\*\*) LANGUAGE-GAME is always an oblique argument.

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<sup>7</sup> Strawson (1950) defined the ‘meaning’ of an expression as ‘the set of rules, habits, conventions for its use in referring’ (p.328), which may seem to suggest that ‘meaning’ here is indirect inflectional nominalization, the ability to mean, analogous to ‘drawing’ in ‘he teaches drawing’ (which refers to the *ability* to draw), but that analogy fails. To teach the drawing of a house is to teach to draw a house (or to teach the ability to do something that is recognized by a certain social group as the activity of drawing a house). But to teach the meaning of ‘tabun’ is not analogically to teach to mean ‘tabun’ (or to teach the ability to do something that is recognized by a certain social group as the activity of meaning ‘tabun’). Rather, to teach the meaning of ‘tabun’ is to teach to mean something specific with ‘tabun’ (or to teach the ability to do something that is recognized by a certain



Grammatically, the two-place predicate version, only stating the obligatory arguments (SUBJECT and D-MEANING) is always sufficient, but pragmatically it is not. Pragmatically, on pain of incomprehensibility or misunderstanding, oblique arguments can only be ‘omitted’ if they are contextually specified. Sentence (2), for example, makes only limited sense to an interpreter who does not know mister Satō and the relevant context(s) in which he said or wrote ‘tabun’. Lacking such contextual knowledge, the interpreter (usually) constructs and attributes a context by means of ‘helpful’ stereotypes and her own prior, assumed to be similar, experiences. To make sense of the sentence the interpreter supplements the missing arguments herself, but in most cases, the speaker or writer is sufficiently aware of what aspects of context need disambiguation and what can be left unmentioned. In any case, the verb ‘to mean’ (and its *inflectional* nominalization ‘meaning’) requires all four (kinds of) arguments, either explicitly stated or implicitly assumed to be known; and thus, pragmatically/semantically, ‘to mean’ is always the four-place predicate version mean', and *the omission of arguments is merely verbal*.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to the lack of derivational agent-meaning pointed out above, English grammar obscures the four-argument character of ‘meaning’ by assigning preferential status to only two of the required arguments, but other European languages do not fare any better in this respect. Rather in the contrary, while the lexical distinctions between sign- and agent-meaning and between inflectional and derivational meaning may have seemed an advantage in comparison to the singular ‘meaning’-as-sign-meaning in English, those same distinctions may further obscure the fact that sign-meaning and agent-meaning are not two different kinds of meaning, but two different ways of leaving out (pragmatically/semantically necessary) arguments. Hence, if the English language is defective with regards to ‘meaning’, then

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social group as the activity of meaning something specific with ‘tabun’). In other words, *if* meaning is an ability (or a set of rules), it is the ability (or the set of rules) to mean the group-specific *derivational sign-meaning* of ‘X’ by uttering ‘X’.

<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the notion of non-verbal verb arguments seems odd from the perspective of English grammar according to which core (obligatory) arguments always have to be stated explicitly and oblique (non-core) arguments can always be omitted, but from the perspective of Japanese, for example, which routinely eliminates arguments that are already contextually specified, it is obvious more than odd.

other European languages are just as defective (but in a different way). Nonetheless, the grammatical and lexical defects make (English) 'meaning' a rather misleading term – meaning is never just sign-meaning; and because of that, as a technical term in philosophy, perhaps 'meaning' should be abolished.

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