Meaning & Communication (PH130)
Lecture 6 Stephen Butterfill, Philosophy/Warwick

Three striking facts

(a) If you understand one utterance of a sentence you probably understand other utterances of it

(b) productivity

(c) systematicity

Hypothesis 1

Sentences have meanings. Users of a language know the meanings of sentences in that language. Knowing the meaning of a sentence someone utters enables us to know which propositions her utterance expresses.

Hypothesis 2

(i) *compositionality*: sentences are composed of words arranged according to syntactic rules, and the meaning of a sentence is determined by the meanings of its constituent words and their arrangement.

(ii) We know the meanings of words and the rules governing how they can be arranged into sentences. This enables us to know the meanings of sentences.

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What are productivity & systematicity? How would the hypotheses explain them?

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Against the Two Hypotheses

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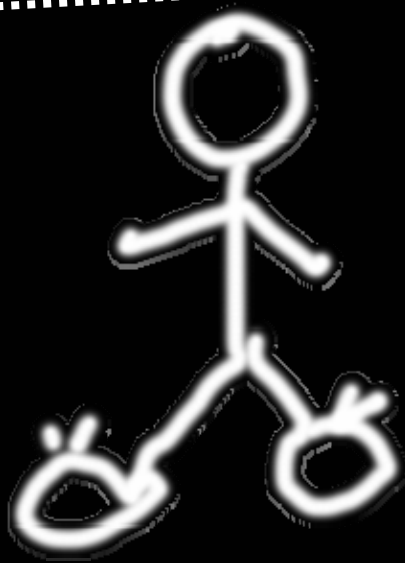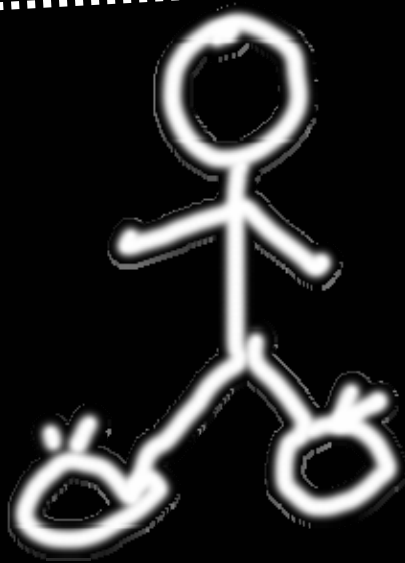
"I visited a house"

"Dogs must be carried"

"Shoes must be worn"

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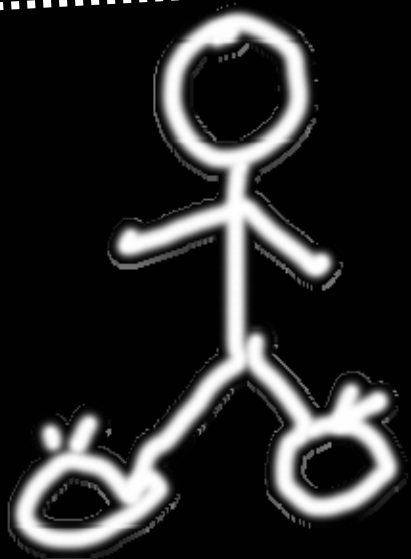
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"I broke a finger"   "I was divorced from a man"

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"I was divorced from a man"

Indexicals

"I broke a finger"

"I was divorced from a man"

Indexicals

'I' refers to the utterer of a
  sentence

"I broke a finger"

"I was divorced from a man"

Indexicals

'I' refers to the utterer of a sentence

'now' refers to the time of utterance

Another objection to the
Two Hypotheses

"I've had breakfast"

"I've had a cold"

"I've had chickenpox"

"I've had breakfast"

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"I've had chickenpox"

"I've had a great evening.
  This wasn't it" (Groucho)

"I've had breakfast"

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Is it necessary to know people generally eat breakfast daily to know what 'breakfast' means?

If *no*, how could knowing the meanings of the words enable you to understand what utterances of "I've had breakfast" communicate?

If *yes*, which facts about breakfast can you come to know through linguistic communication?

A third objection to the Two
Hypotheses

ONE "Are you hungry?"

TWO "I've had breakfast"

ONE "Are you hungry?"

TWO "I've had breakfast"

THREE "How are you?"
FOUR "I've had breakfast"

We know what utterances communicate because we know what the sentences uttered mean.

We know what sentences mean because we know the meanings of the words they contain and the rules of syntax.

Arbitrary features of context of utterance can influence what is communicated in indefinitely complex ways

Arbitrary facts about the type of thing a word refers to can influence what utterances of sentences containing that word communicate

Utterances of a sentence can be used to communicate an open-ended array of apparently unrelated propositions.

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