

Every sign is a material object: an ink stain on the paper, sound wave etc. These physical objects do not seem to have any meaning on their own. It is intuitive to think that, for instance a word “horse” could have a very different meaning, or no meaning at all. It is quite frequently assumed that there is some entity attached or closely related to a sign that is its meaning, perhaps an “image in the head” or an abstract object (such as proposition). However, that kind of solution seems to reproduce the very same problem on a different level - now we need to say how these mental images or abstract entities possess meaning. An interesting alternative to representationalist theories of meaning could be elaborated in terms of usage of linguistic expressions. This view has the advantage of not positing any further entity that accompanies or is associated with an expression, but rather look how the word is employed to account for its meaning. Moreover, use theories of meaning have also such advantage over other types of theories that they are ontologically modest: they do not postulate entities (like images in the head) of any kind in order to account for meaning.

In our research we would like to focus specifically on inferential theories of meaning. According to such theories, the meaning of the linguistic expression is its inferential role. Roughly speaking, to grasp the meaning of “father” is to be prepared to make linguistic moves of the following kind:

x is a father \rightarrow x is a male

x is a father \rightarrow x has at least one child

Externalism is a very popular view in the philosophy of mind and language, it is a view that meanings and contents are determined by external factors. They are not “in the head”. It may seem that externalism is in tension with inferentialism because inferences are things that subjects carry in their head. Our aim is to show that properly understood inferential theory of meaning is possible to accommodate all important points made by externalists (for example about the role of linguistic community and experts in determining meaning and content). We aim at showing that inferentialist can understand language as a product of natural selection and acknowledge the role of recent developments in psychology/cognitive science (to see language as a product of natural history of human thinking).