Words and Origins

Abstract: In what follows I am attempting to do two things. Firstly, I will try to defend the view that words types are individuated by their origins from some objections. In the course of doing this it will be necessary to clarify the view in several respects. This will bring me to the second aim of the paper, advancing some theses about the social and normative character of words and their origins.

Hawthorne and Lepore [2011] describe a view they attribute to Ruth Millikan and Mark Richard as follows:

"Origin: Words w^1 and w^2 are identical iff w^1 and w^2 have the same originating event (where the originating event is the first performance of the word)."

This form of the view that words are individuated by their origin, which to the best of my knowledge was never held by Millikan or Richard, is a sort of straw man. I refer in particular to the parenthetical clarification. The idea that for every word type there has to be a single first performance of it is clearly a very crude simplification. There can be several performances (at different times, or even simultaneous) which together constitute the origin of a word; and as Hawthorne and Lepore go on to show, taking down their straw man, there can be originating events which are not at all performances of the word. Allowing for these cases only requires eliminating the parenthetical clarification and talking about originating events, in the plural, leaving open of course that there may be only one of them:

Real Origin (RO): Words w^1 and w^2 are identical iff w^1 and w^2 have the same originating events.

A different kind of counterexample has been proposed in the literature, involving different words that allegedly have the same origin. For example, Irmak (2018) considers the case of the words "fraile" and "fragile" in English, which both derive from the Latin "*fragilis*", the latter directly and the former through the old French "*fraile*". In my view, these are indeed different words, and they clearly have distinct originating events. The different originating events are pointed out in the counterexample itself, some having to do with the acquisition in English of the French word, and some having to do with the acquisition of the Latin word.

At this point, one could perhaps worry that I am making the view uninformative. If we are so flexible about what counts as the origin of a word, the objection would go, we can preserve all pre-theoretical judgements about identity and difference of words, but only because we stipulate an origin whenever it is needed. However, note first that (RO) still has some interesting theoretical consequences. It rules out the view that words are abstract objects without an origin; arguably, it also rules out all forms of internalism about words; since the word's origin typically lies outside the internal states of the speaker, which words we are using does not supervene on our internal states. Still, I think the objection has a point, if it amounts to a request of clarification about what counts as the originating event of a word. In the rest of the paper I will attempt to address this question.

Words are social tools, which serve the purposes of thinking and communicating. Philosophers tend to think of the introduction of a new word on the model of the stipulation of meaning for a technical term. There are however many more ways in which words come into existence. I believe, for example, that a long series of erroneous uses of a word - erroneous with respect to meaning, orthography, pronunciation, grammar, or some combination of those - can be the originating event of a new word. In order for this to happen, the linguistic community must somehow come to accept the new usage as fully adequate. The whole process can be largely implicit, and there need not be any single speaker responsible for it. Any account of originating events must be able to encompass the diversity just noted. Let us go back to the stipulation model. It might be thought that in such cases the intentions of the speaker and the relevant linguistic acts are sufficient. I think this is wrong. One can try to introduce a new word and fail, for a variety of reasons. The word might not have a sufficiently definite meaning, or form. This might be true even for a speaker introducing the word in isolation; by their own lights, on reflection, the attempt might be judged a failure. The isolated speaker can be thought of as a linguistic community, where different temporal parts of the individual play the role of different speakers. With this in mind, we can advance a general thesis about originating events:

Origin Events (OE): Events $e^1 \ldots e^n$ give origin to a new word w iff they establish a set of norms for the use of w which are accepted by the linguistic community

The set of norms governing a word can tolerate several variants, and extensions; but there have to be limits to the changes that can occur without the word losing its identity. To illustrate, consider the case of the word "meat". In old English, "meat" was synonymous with "food". My view, compatible with (although not entailed by) OE, is that when the change occurred, a new word was introduced in the language, a homonym of the old one. This is because the norms governing the use of "meat" nowadays create a contradiction with the old ones. Utterances of "apples are meat" are going to be true or false depending on which norms are operative, and I think this is a good reason to accept that different words are associated with those norms. Originalism, equipped with a realistic account of originating events, need not be inconsistent with assigning to truth-conditional aspects of meaning some role in the individuation of words.

References

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