The grammar of "meaning"

Lajos L. Brons, Nihon University
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.¹

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

1 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.

2 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’.3 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.

3 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.

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’)\(^3\) 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\(^4\) (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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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’), -(a)tion (‘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). Furthermore, there are other differences in possible usage between these two forms.6

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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5 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).

6 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’ cannot 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. 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 $\text{MEAN(AGENT,SIGN)}$ with two possible variants of $\text{SUBJECT}$: 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 $\text{MEAN'}$ would be:

$$\text{MEAN'}(\text{AGENT*,SIGN*,D-MEANING,LANGUAGE-GAME**}),$$

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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7. 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.

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’.

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.

References

postscript to ‘the grammar of ‘meaning”’

Lajos L. Brons (mail@lajosbrons.net)
Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences, Nihon University, Tokyo, Japan.

In ‘The Grammar of ‘Meaning’ (Brons 2011), I suggested that the verb “to mean” should be understood as a 4-place predicate $\text{MEAN}^\prime$:

(1) $\text{MEAN}^\prime (\text{AGENT}^*, \text{SIGN}^*, \text{D-MEANING}, \text{LANGUAGE-GAME}**)\,$

in which of the two arguments $\text{AGENT}$ and $\text{SIGN}$ (marked $\ast$) one is obligatory and fills the subject slot and the other is an optional, oblique argument, and in which $\text{LANGUAGE-GAME} (**) \text{ or context of uttering is always an oblique argument. The argument D-MEANING represents ‘the meaning’ of the sign as that term is usually understood: a description of meaning.}$

The prime in “$\text{MEAN}^\prime$” marks the distinction from the 2-place predicate $\text{MEAN} (\text{SUBJECT, D-MEANING})$, which is grammatically, but not semantically / pragmatically sufficient. The 2-place predicate includes only the obligatory arguments; oblique arguments can be omitted by definition. However, semantically / pragmatically, on pain of incomprehensibility or misunderstanding, oblique arguments can only be ‘omitted’ if they are contextually specified.

Since publication of ‘the Grammar of ‘Meaning’, I changed my mind about some of the details of the analysis in that paper. I now believe that “to mean” is a 3-place predicate $\text{MEAN} (\text{SUBJECT, D-MEANING})$. This ‘postscript’ explains why, and offers an alternative (although largely converging) analysis of the verb “to mean”. (It should perhaps be noted that as a postscript, it is not intended to replace the original article, but merely to correct and supplement it.)

The English verb “to mean” can take two different kinds of subjects. Compare, for example:

(2) In Japanese, “tabun” means “probably”.
(3) With “tabun”, mister Satō means “no”.

In (2) the subject is a word or sign (tabun); in (3) it is a person (mister Satō). Hence, these two sentences can be understood as involving two different verbs “to mean”, sign-meaning in (2) and agent-meaning in (3). Of course, there is a sign mentioned in (3) (tabun), but it is mere oblique argument, like “in Japanese” in (2).

1 Draft version: 1.1 (June 7, 2012). This short paper mostly coincides with a section of a working paper that is currently titled ‘Indirectly referring verb arguments’. That and other working papers are available at www.lajosbrons.net/wp.
In neither (2) nor (3) the thematic roles of the various sentence parts are entirely unambiguous. (3) is most straightforward because in this sentence “to mean” is more or less an action verb. It seems analyzable something like:

(3a) ∃x [ meaning(x) & agent(mister Satō) & theme(“no”) & instrument(“tabun”) ] ,

although I expect the classification of both “no” as theme and “tabun” as instrument to be controversial. (Because this matters little for the argument here, I will further ignore the issue.) Of these arguments, the instrument can be omitted, it is an oblique argument, and therefore the (n-tuple of) syntactic arguments (Syn.A) of “to agent mean” is ⟨agent, theme⟩. However, given the different grammatical functions of different roles in (2) and (3), it is useful to specify both thematic roles and grammatical functions (of the elements of Syn.A), the latter in subscript:

(3b) Syn.A(to agent mean) = ⟨agent_{subject}, theme_{complement clause}⟩

As mentioned, (2) is less easily interpreted in terms of standard thematic roles, and even the more detailed role classification of Role and Reference Grammar is of little help. “To mean” in this sense seems to be somewhere in between the equational and specificational verb types with the associated roles of referents in the first case, and variables and values in the second. A sign is not a variable, however, and the equational verb type does not capture the explanatory hierarchy involved in a specification of meaning. Perhaps, the best option is a slight modification of the specificational type, substituting ‘sign’ for ‘variable’:

(2a) ∃x [ meaning(x) & sign(“tabun”) & value(“probably”) & context(in Japanese) ]

As in (3a), the last of these arguments is an oblique argument, and thus:

(2b) Syn.A(to sign mean) = ⟨sign_{subject}, value_{complement clause}⟩

It should be noted that “meaning” in (2a) and (3a) is the event of meaning, while in ordinary language “meaning” always refers to an abstract object (rather than an event). “Meaning”, of course, is a nominalization of “to mean”. However, if (2) and (3) are nominalized, something odd happens:

(4) The meaning of “tabun” in Japanese is “probably”.
(4a) ∀x [ x=“tabun” & Japanese(x) → meaning(x,“probably”) ]
(5) The meaning of mister Satō’s “tabun” is “no”.
(5a) ∀x [ x=“tabun” & mister-Satō’s(x) → meaning(x,“no”) ]
Contrary to (2a) and (3a), in (4), (5), and their formal representations “meaning” is an abstract object. More important, however, but not unrelated, is that in both (4) and (5) “meaning” is sign-meaning. There is in (ordinary) English no nominalized form of agent-meaning (which would be an event). (For more about this, see the original paper (Brons 2011).) Nominalization (5) of (3) reveals that even in case of agent-meaning, the oblique argument specifying the sign (‘instrument’ in (3a)) is semantically necessary.

Furthermore, these nominalizations also reveal the semantic necessity of some aspect(s) of context. Without the specifications “in Japanese” and “mister Satō’s”, (4) and (5) make no sense (unless in case of (4) both speaker and hearer know that “tabun” is a Japanese word, and know that the other knows that, but then that aspect of context is specified, albeit contextually and implicitly rather than linguistically and explicitly). For “to mean” to mean anything, the language-game (to borrow Wittgenstein’s notion) in which the sign is embedded needs to be specified. The semantic function of “mister Satō” in (3/5) is the identification of a specific idiolect or utterance-occasion, hence a specific language-game: within that language-game, “tabun” means “no”. Consequently, if (the n-tuple of) semantic arguments (Sem.A) is formalized like syntactic arguments (Syn.A), then:

(6) \( \text{Sem.A(to mean)} = \langle \text{sign, language-game, value} \rangle \)

which applies to both (2/4) and (3/5). The main difference between sign-meaning as in (2/4) and agent-meaning as in (3), is that the former identifies the language-game as a natural language, dialect or terminology, while the latter identifies it with a speaker and occasion, or a (context-specific) idiolect. Nevertheless, despite the syntactic difference, sign-meaning and agent-meaning are semantically identical.

Converting (1), the 4-place predicate understanding of “to mean” of the original paper, into the style of formalization used here results in:

(1a) \( \text{Sem.A(to mean)*} = \langle \text{agent, sign, language-game, value} \rangle \)

Aside from the small change of terminology (‘D-MEANING’ is now ‘value’), there is a more important (and more obvious) difference: the omission of the argument ‘agent’ in (6). According to (6), the agent is not a semantically necessary argument. That this is the case, that the speaker him/herself is not a semantic argument, but merely an identifier of a language game, becomes clear if one considers the alternative: agent-meaning would then attribute fixed and non-context-dependent vocabularies to speakers, which is both nonsense, and not what is intended in uses of agent-meaning. The reference is to a speaker’s words in context, hence to a language game.

\* Wittgenstein (1953) introduced the concept of “language-game” to refer to a variety of notions of language (or language-like signing systems) in use/action in some (specific) context.
Comparing the semantic structure of the verb “to mean” as given in (6) with the syntax of (2) and (3), as in the table below, reveals that both sign-meaning and agent-meaning obscure the semantically essential role and the nature of language-games.

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In agent-meaning, the language-game is not an argument itself, but is indirectly represented by an agent (speaker, writer, etc.). That agent is not a semantic argument itself, however, and thus obscures the essential role of the language game. Sign-meaning to some extent obscures the language-game by making it a mere oblique argument, but much more important is that it disconnects language-games from speakers, and seems to make them objective, near monolithic things. (See also Davidson’s (1986, 1994) arguments for the ‘primacy of the idiolect’.) In a sense, in agent-meaning (the representation of) the role of the speaker is too strong, while in sign-meaning it is too weak.

It was mentioned above that language-games can be specified contextually and implicitly rather than linguistically and explicitly. This happens automatically in agent-meaning by deferring to the speaker, but it is also very common in sign-meaning. Take the following sentence as an example:

(7) “Univocal” means “having only one meaning”.

The unspecified language-game here is the English language, or – more likely – some terminological part thereof. In a case like (7), if the language-game is not mentioned, it defaults to the most salient language-game that the sign could be part of (Japanese in case of “tabun”; geology in case of “bedrock”; some English terminology in case of “univocal”, and so forth). More in general, if a semantic core argument is not explicitly mentioned, it defaults to what is most salient in the context of (the utterance of) the sentence.³

But salience is a relative notion – relative to the speaker, his addressees, and their particular common ground at the moment. Recently, a colleague heard a woman ask her husband as she was about to lift her baby into their car, Couldn’t you help me by doing a Chomsky? Who would

³ The role of such unspecified arguments and their (salient) defaults is the research topic of Default semantics.
ever have thought do a Chomsky could have meant “open the car door”? Yet, as it later came out, she and her husband had been out with Noam Chomsky the week before – her only visit with him – when he had courteously opened the car door as she struggled in with her baby. With do a Chomsky, she was alluding to an act associated with Chomsky that was especially salient in her and her husband’s common ground – they had perhaps discussed Chomsky’s courtesy in the meantime. It did not matter that the act was not part of the common ground she shared with anyone else. She was speaking to her husband, and so it had to be salient only in their common ground. (Clark & Gerrig 1983, pp. 599-600)

references