Conceptual Role Semantics

GILBERT HARMAN*

In this paper, I will attempt to say something about a number of issues that arise in connection with "conceptual role semantics," the approach to semantics for which I have the most sympathy. On this occasion I will be able only to sketch aspects of this view without being able to give detailed arguments.

1 What is conceptual role semantics?   A theory of conceptual role semantics involves the following two claims:

1. The meanings of linguistic expressions are determined by the contents of the concepts and thoughts they can be used to express.
2. The contents of concepts and thoughts are determined by their functional role in a person's psychology.

"Thoughts" here include beliefs, hopes, desires, fears, and other attitudes, in addition to thoughts properly so called. "Functional role" includes any special roles a concept may play in perception and in inference or reasoning, including practical reasoning that leads to action.

Conceptual role semantics represents one thing that might be meant by the slogan "meaning is use". But a proper appreciation of the point requires distinguishing (at least) two uses of symbols, their use in calculation, as in adding a column of figures, and their use in communication, as in telling someone the result.

1.1 Two uses of symbols: communication and calculation   Symbols that are being used in calculation are typically not being used at that time for communication. When you add a column of figures you are not normally communicating anything even to yourself. A similar point holds in reverse.