Modeling the Meanings of Pictures
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Depiction and the philosophy of language

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For Geraldine Caufield, Sooja Lee Park, and Soon Park
# Table of Contents

*Preface and Acknowledgments* ix  
*List of Figures* xi  
*List of Tables* xiii  

1. Pictures, Communication, and Meaning  
   1.1 Pictures and Language 2  
   1.2 The Structure of the Book 6  
   1.3 The Meaning Thread 7  
   1.4 The Parts Thread 14  
   1.5 What This Book is Not 17  

2. Character, Content, and Reference 19  
   2.1 Kaplan’s Distinctions 20  
   2.2 Interpreting Pictures 22  
   2.3 Bare Bones Content as Pictorial Character 25  
   2.4 Pictorial Content 28  
   2.5 (In)definite Description and Reference 32  
   2.6 Worries about Indirect Pictorial Reference 34  
   2.7 Summary 35  

3. Parts of Pictures 37  
   3.1 Syntax Without (Much) Grammar 38  
   3.2 Abstraction and Content 39  
   3.3 Two Clarifying Objections 43  
   3.4 The Parts Principle 45  
   3.5 Syntactic Parts and Semantic Roles 48  
   3.6 Revisiting Indirect Pictorial Reference 50  
   3.7 Summary 51  

4. Pictorial Dthat 53  
   4.1 Attributive and Referential Use 53  
   4.2 Using Pictures Referentially 55  
   4.3 Dthat 56  
   4.4 Referential Use as Dthat 58  
   4.5 Worries about Deferred Ostention 61  
   4.6 Postcards and Portraits 65  
   4.7 Using Parts of Pictures Referentially 73  
   4.8 Individuals and Properties in Other Accounts 74  
   4.9 Summary 77
viii  TABLE OF CONTENTS

5. Iconography 78
   5.1 Introducing Iconography 79
   5.2 A Semantic Mechanism 83
   5.3 Labeling 86
   5.4 Stories 88
   5.5 The Practicalities of Iconography 93
   5.6 Uses of Iconographic Interpretation 94
   5.7 Iconographic Interpretation in Language? 96
   5.8 Summary 98

6. Metaphor 99
   6.1 Illustrated, Suggested, and Supplemental Metaphors 100
   6.2 Some Non-metaphorical, Atypical Uses of Pictures 103
   6.3 Strictly Pictorial Metaphors 106
   6.4 Stern on Mthat 110
   6.5 Mthat and Strictly Pictorial Metaphors 113
   6.6 Stern’s Worries about Metaphor in Pictures 115
   6.7 Summary 117

7. Direct Reference in Pictures and Maps 118
   7.1 Presence in Photographs and Maps 119
   7.2 How Objects are Involved 120
   7.3 Two Worries about Locations as Names 122
   7.4 Absence and Map Semantics 123
   7.5 Why Maps Have Constant Characters 126
   7.6 The Path from Pictures to Comics to Maps 127
   7.7 Summary 129

8. Distinguishing Kinds by Parts 131
   8.1 Syntax and Compositionality 132
   8.2 Separable Syntactic Parts 133
   8.3 Inseparable Syntactic Parts 135
   8.4 The Main Claim 136
   8.5 Three Objections to the Main Claim 137
   8.6 Why the Objections Fail 138
   8.7 Compositionality and Inseparability 144
   8.8 Why Non-propositional? 146
   8.9 Summary 148

References 151
Index 157
Preface and Acknowledgments

This book was unexpected. In 2016, I was asked to present a paper at a conference in honor of Josef Stern, who was one of my dissertation advisors. My plan was simple. Josef is well-known for his work on metaphor, and I have long liked, but been skeptical of, a paper of his that claims there are no distinctively pictorial metaphors. In the spirit of being difficult, I thought it would be fun to try and convince Josef that, in light of his own account, there are indeed pictorial metaphors.

Metaphor, for Stern, is partly a semantic phenomenon, and he suggests that we explain it by appeal to a semantic operation akin to David Kaplan’s dthat, which is defined over the character and content of a definite description. So, all I had to do is explain what the character and content of a picture is. That turned out to be an interesting and largely unasked question. The paper was a sketchy mess, but the timing was perfect.

For the 2017–18 academic year, I was scheduled to be on sabbatical, which is an excellent time to write a book, even if it was not quite the book I was supposed to be writing while on sabbatical. In the fall of 2017, I spent six productive weeks visiting Bence Nanay’s research group at the University of Antwerp. I thank him and audiences there for helpful feedback. Later that fall, Elisabeth Schellekens Dammann hosted me as a visitor for a month at the University of Uppsala, where I got to present a few chapters and, again, received much help. Thanks.

This book also benefited from a fellowship at the Paris Institute for Advanced Study (France), with the financial support of the French State, program “Investissements d’avenir” managed by the Agence Nationale de la Recherche (ANR-11-LABX-0027-01 Labex RFIEA+). Conditions there were ideal. My colleagues were engaging, the Institute was supportive and beautiful and perfectly located. I thank Gretty Mirdal, the Director at the time, Simon Luck, and the rest of the staff for making my stay so wonderful.

While in Paris, Roberto Casati and Jérôme Dokic organized parallel EHESS seminars on iconicity in which I was able to present the book in its entirety. They also brought in other people who specialize on pictures, like Catharine Abell, Katerina Bantinaki, and John Zeimbekis. Enrico Terrone arranged a presentation at the Institut Jean Nicod’s Aesthetics and Cognitive
Science Seminar. François Recanati made many helpful suggestions. I thank all of the participants at these seminars, and the members of the Institut Jean Nicod, who also made my stay in Paris productive and engaging.

Also while I was in Paris, the London Aesthetics Forum provided a familiar and welcome place to discuss metaphor in pictures. Thanks to Andrew Huddleston for organizing. I presented parts of Chapter 4 at the philosophy colloquium at Goethe University in Frankfurt. Thanks to Martin Seel for the invitation.

In between stints abroad I presented some material from Chapter 4 at the American Society for Aesthetics annual meeting. Thanks to the audience and especially to Thomas Adajian for helpful comments. And in the 2018–19 academic year I presented material to helpfully skeptical audiences at the University of Glasgow (thanks to Derek Brown and Robert Briscoe), NYU-Abu Dhabi (thanks to Gabe Rabin), and the University of San Diego (thanks to Jonathan Cohen and Matthew Fulkerson). Finally, Zed Adams organized a great conference on kinds of representation, at which I received very helpful comments on Chapter 8 from Liz Camp.

Eliot Michaelson read through a good bit of the manuscript and provided very helpful feedback. Josef Stern read through the whole thing and offered very detailed and helpful comments. I am an amateur philosopher of language, so the messes here are my fault, but I owe Eliot and Josef for helping me avoid some real blunders. Paul Taylor offered very helpful criticisms of Chapter 5. I am much less than an amateur art historian, so his input was particularly welcome. Remaining mistakes, in all cases, are my own.

Peter Momtchiloff and Sophie Robinson at Oxford University Press have been supportive throughout, and they found some very astute readers for the manuscript. Their comments have also improved things quite a bit, though I fear not as much as they would have hoped.

Thanks to Sunny Park for her support, especially on the cloudy days.
List of Figures

2.1 *Three Chairs*. Photo: the author. 23

4.1 Sketch. Drawn by Soo Sunny Park. 55

4.2 Two sketches. Drawn by Soo Sunny Park. 60

4.3 Hans Holbein, *Sir Thomas More*, 1527, oil on oak panel (cradled), 74.9 × 60.3 cm. © The Frick Collection. 69

4.4 Paul Cezanne, *Madame Cezanne (Hortense Fiquet, 1850–1922) in a Red Dress*, 1888–90, oil on canvas, 116.5 × 89.5 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, CCO 1.0 Universal, Public Domain. 70

5.1 Raphael. *Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, 1508, oil on poplar, 72.2 × 55.7 cm. © The National Gallery, London. 80

5.2 Unknown, Spanish, *St Catherine Delivered from the Wheel*, ca 1375–1400, oil and tempera on panel, 35.8 × 33 cm. Art Institute of Chicago, CCO 1.0 Universal, Public Domain. 81

5.3 Palma Vecchio, *Sacra Conversazione*, ca 1516–18, tempera on wood, 84.5 × 106 cm. Collection of the Poznań Society of Friends of Sciences (deposited at the National Museum in Poznań), MNP Mo 24. 82

5.4 Albrecht Dürer, *Great Triumphant Car* (detail) 1522. British Museum, Public Domain. 87

5.5 Botticelli, Sandro. *The Cestello Annunciation*. 1489–90, tempera on panel, 150 × 156 cm, Uffizi Gallery. Photo: Scala/Art Resource, New York. 90


5.7 Rembrandt van Rijn, *Historiesuk met zelfportret van de schilder*, signed and dated 1626, oil on panel, 90.1 × 121.3 cm, Museum De Lackenhal, Leiden; long-term loan from the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands. 92

xii LIST OF FIGURES

6.2 Some Animals are Treated Like Garbage, 2017. Advertising Agency: Ruf Lanz, Zurich, Switzerland. CGI: Carioca Studio/Visualeyes International © Tier im Recht. 102

6.3 Pablo Picasso, Baboon and Young, 1955, Bronze, 53.3 × 33.3 × 52.7 cm. © Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, New York. 104


6.6 The Identity of Young Chennai, 2009. Advertising Agency: JWT, Chennai. © The Times of India. 110

8.1 Syntactic inseparability. The author. 140

List of Tables

1.1 The structure of the book 7
1.2 Character and content 9
1.3 Character and content 2 11
1.4 Character and content 3 12
1.5 Character and content 4 13
4.1 Attributive and referential use 58
4.2 Attributive, referential, denotative, non-denotative 66
Pictures, Communication, and Meaning

Pictures are important parts of communicative acts, along with language, gesture, facial expressions, and props. They express wide ranges of thoughts, make assertions, offer warnings, instructions, and commands. Pictures are also representations. They have meanings, which help explain the range of communicative uses to which they can be put. Modeling the meanings of pictures is accounting for the ways in which pictures manage to be meaningful, with an eye toward how those meanings let us use them as we do.

Sentences have meanings too. “The weather is horrible!” can be used to express the thought that the weather is horrible, in part because of what it means. Used differently, that same sentence can communicate that the weather is wonderful, also in part because of what it means, even though it doesn’t mean that. One would be hard pressed to use a sentence about the weather to express the thought that Saturn has five rings but no chickens. It could happen, but only in an impressively strange set of circumstances. That’s because only under odd conditions could a sentence that means something about the weather communicate something about poultry and the rings of Saturn.

Sometimes pictures are the only representational parts of communicative acts. They adorn boxes, showing what’s inside. They are placed on doors, suggesting a push or a pull. They are in churches, providing objects for contemplation and prayer. Other times, they are parts of acts that also involve language. “Get me one of these,” while gesturing at a picture of a screwdriver. “Find him,” gesturing at a mugshot. “The President” affixed to a photo. An account of pictorial meaning should help explain these modes of cohabitation.

The philosophy of language is the most obvious place to look for tools that model meanings. If those tools do not shed light on pictures, one might wonder whether they are the right ones for language, given that pictures and language are so often partners in crime. If they do help, then the approach has all the advantages of theft, and it might shed new light on what they, developed with language in mind, are really tools for. This book offers an...
account of pictorial meaning, inspired by the philosophy of language, that does justice to the range of communicative uses to which pictures are put.

1.1 Pictures and Language

Theorists of depiction have consistently borrowed concepts from the philosophy of language.¹ Both areas have articulate lives of their own, and they are both built around studying representation. They remain separate because the most salient questions in each don’t overlap with those in the other. The study of pictures focuses on the experiences they elicit, while the study of language focuses on syntax, semantics, and pragmatics.

What is it about the word “wombat” that makes it about wombats? How does that configuration of letters conspire to deliver the little beasts as contents? Does the experience of letters, written just so, forge a special link to these animals? These questions sound fun, but they turn out to be uninteresting. Consensus is that just about any other word could have wound up meaning wombats, so no story linking features of letters to wombathood will be particularly illuminating. By contrast, what is it about a flat pattern of pigment that brings one into contact with a complex wombat scene? Is it a special kind of experience, the deployment of recognitional capacities, resemblance, or what? These questions are very interesting and definitely worth philosophers’ time. Pictures are understood, in part, because of the distinctive kinds of experiences they elicit, and there has been much said about what these experiences are like. With few exceptions (Goodman 1976, Kulvicki 2006, Greenberg 2013), it has been standard to argue that we can understand what makes pictures distinctive by understanding the special kinds of experiences they elicit. By contrast, very little work in the philosophy of language focuses on how reading or hearing inscriptions and utterances explains how they are understood.

¹ David Novitz (1977), Catharine Abell (2009), and Ben Blumson (2014) have made use of Gricean tools, among others, to help with understanding pictures. Elisabeth Camp (2007, 2018) has been working on modeling the meanings of maps and other representations. Gabriel Greenberg’s work (2013, 2018) is an interesting and helpful alternative to what is offered here. Dominic Lopes (1996, 2010), John Hyman (2012), John Zeimbekis (2010), and Raphael De Clercq (2015) have, in different ways, also leaned on some tools from the philosophy of language. Nelson Goodman (1976) spoke of Languages of Art, but didn’t so much use tools from the philosophy of language as build his own, which he hoped would deliver a theory of symbolization that transcends the picture–language divide. That approach has not taken hold.
Central to the philosophical study of language are things pictures seem to lack. First, a rich grammar that, second, supports highly articulate modes of meaning, which, third, can be used in many ways conversationally. Syntax, semantics, pragmatics. Philosophers have disagreed about how to distinguish these three since Charles Morris introduced the terminology in 1938, but it’s worth sketching moderately uncontroversial working definitions for what follows.

First, semantics is interested primarily in the conditions under which declarative sentences are true or false, in a way that abstracts from many aspects of conversational use. “I am in great shape” is true just in case the person who utters it is in great shape. When said while huffing and puffing one’s way up a mountain, that sentence can communicate the thought that one is in terrible shape. Nevertheless, semantically it says that one is in great shape. In that sense, semantics is interested in truth conditions in a manner abstracting from conversational use. To ignore some aspects of conversational use, however, is not to ignore completely the context in which the claim is made. Who, after all, is “I”? The meaning of the sentence is underdetermined when abstracted completely from context because in that case it is unclear who is supposed to be in great shape. These contextual aspects of semantics will be important in what follows. It is controversial how best to draw the line between contextual factors that matter for semantics and those that are relevant to the pragmatics of interpretation. This book will not offer a new way of doing that, so much as try to convince readers that, on just about any way of drawing the divide, there is an important place for pictorial semantics.

Second, declarative sentences are complex, in an interesting way. It’s not just that they are composed of lots of noises, or letters, but that they have parts that contribute to whether they are true or false. The word “great,” for example, plays a role in determining the conditions under which the sentence above is true or false, as do the complex phrases “in great shape,” “am in great shape.” Moreover, all of these parts can occur in different complex expressions, like “The high priest is in great shape.” These parts follow rules about how they can be combined with other parts, and they affect a sentence’s truth conditions because of how they are meaningful, and combined with other parts. So, the indexical “I” has a meaning, and that makes a contribution to whether the sentence “I am in great shape” is true. Syntax is the study of what the meaningful parts of complexes are, and how they combine to yield meaningful wholes. One can describe the syntactic structure of a sentence, for example, without saying much of anything about its