What is the Task of Semantic Theory?
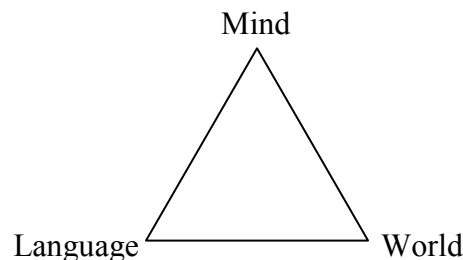
(1) **A Semantics for Natural Language**: Linguists (and some philosophers) say that a semantic theory should only *describe* which meanings are assigned to which expressions in a natural language. Thus construed, the hypothesis is that a semantic theory articulates *what a speaker knows* when she has acquired a language.

(2) **Regimentation**: Natural language is all squishy and weird, with various types of ambiguity, vagueness, context-sensitivity, and whatnot. This causes a lot of problems for philosophers (if not *all* problems, as Wittgenstein held). A semantic theory should take a natural language and *prescribe* a way to translate into an artifical language in order to get rid of the squishiness (or at least allow us to track the squishiness in a clear way). *Quine* is the most obvious practitioner here. Although, if the theory is also a classical theory of truth, that naturally brings to mind *Tarski*.

(2a) **A Theory of Truth**: A semantic theory should regiment 'true' and other semantic terms like 'denotes' to avoid paradoxes like the Liar ("This sentence is false.") Such an approach originates with *Tarski*. Some (such as Dummett) have emphasized that a theory of truth also translates analytically valid inferences into inferences which are valid in virtue of their logical form. This purports to reduce all cases of validity to formal validity.

(3) **Hybrid of (1) and (2)**: The aim is to describe natural language, but the descriptions are to be couched in a regimented language. Yet admittedly, it is practically impossible to describe much of language in a regimented way. (In fact, philosophical terms that (2) targets may be cases in point!) Thus, the theory only targets a *proper part* of the language that can be faithfully described in this way. Such a theory is incomplete (and may even miss what is most profound about language), but a partial theory is better than no theory.

(4) **Naturalization**: A semantic theory should reduce or explain semantic phenomena in terms of natural science. Sometimes this is called a "metasemantics" (Kaplan) or a "pre-semantics" (Millikan). *Quine* tried a behaviorist naturalization; *Kripke* and *Fodor* explain meaning by a term's causal relation to its denotation; *Millikan* analyzes meaning in evolutionary terms.

Philosophy of Language concerns the semantic relations between language and world, and language's capacity to express the mind. *Philosophy of Mind* also considers the latter, but in addition studies semantic relationship between thought and world. *Epistemology* covers the epistemic relations between mind and world.