

## **INTENTIONALITY (499 words)**

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Mental acts such as beliefs, desires, wants, or expectations are directed at an object; they have content. In other words, they are *about* something. This ‘aboutness’ is referred to in the **philosophy of mind** and language as intentionality. The Latin term ‘intendere’ means ‘to point’ at something, ‘to aim’ in a particular direction – just as an arrow aims at a target, so a mental state aims at an object. Derived from Aristotle, through Avicenna and medieval doctrines of **knowledge** and experience, intentionality was brought to the forefront of philosophical discussions in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Franz Brentano (1874). It was subsequently developed by Brentano’s students, most notably Edmund Husserl (1900-1901), the founder of German phenomenology, where phenomenology is the study of conscious experience, the ways things (‘phenomena’) are presented to consciousness. It has to be remembered that not all mental states are intentional: feeling dizzy, for example, is not intentional. Moreover, not all intentional mental states are conscious: there can be unconscious beliefs and desires.

Brentano proposed that objects of consciousness are all in the mind. When John sees a brown dog, intentionality amounts to a relation between John and the act of seeing, the properties of which are spelled out by adverbs ‘brownly’ and ‘dogly’. Phenomenologists later replaced this theory by defining intentionality as a relation between an experiencer and a mental object, and subsequently a real object. For Husserl (1913), **meaning** is contained in a *noema*, the objective content of consciousness. These ideas were further developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Heidegger.

Intentionality is of primary importance for linguistic **pragmatics** in that intentional acts provide the meaning of expressions. Meaning expressed in language is a sub-type of such noematic, intentional meaning. Linguistic utterances are carriers of speaker's meaning (vehicles of thought) and inherit intentionality from corresponding mental acts/states. Just as my thought has content (is intentional), so my linguistic expression of this thought has content (is intentional). This can be exemplified by **indexical** expressions such as personal or demonstrative pronouns, which contain an act of demonstration as part of their meaning. For example, the meaning of the **demonstrative** 'that' is not entirely contained in the word: the word is an open symbol (indexical, deictic) that requires an external assignment of the exact referent. In contemporary linguistics, the standard distinction is made between linguistic meaning (character) and semantic content (Kaplan 1989). Intentionality is a useful concept for researching pragmatic ambiguities and helps explain the **default** status of certain interpretations (see Jaszczolt 1999). In contemporary **philosophy of language**, intentionality has been regarded either as a feature of conscious states (Searle 1983, 1992) or as brain states with informational content (Fodor 1975, 1981). According to Fodor's realist stance, intentionality is present in the head in the form of computations in the brain: there are no mental states, there are only brain states. There are ample approaches to intentionality in current research on language and mind (see Lyons 1995). In some circles intentionality is currently referred to as representationality (cf. Strawson 2005; Woodfield 1994).

*See also:* Propositional attitudes; reference

***Suggestions for further reading:***

Lyons, W. (1995) *Approaches to Intentionality*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Searle, J.R. (1983) *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Smith, D.W. and Thomasson, A.L. (eds) (2005) *Phenomenology and Philosophy of Mind*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

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Strawson, G. (2005) 'Intentionality and experience: terminological preliminaries', in D.W. Smith & A.L. Thomasson (eds) *Phenomenology and Philosophy of Mind*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Woodfield, A. (1994) 'Intentionality', in R.E. Asher (ed.) *The Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, Oxford: Pergamon Press.