

**'NATURAL' SEMANTIC
FACTS — BETWEEN ELIMINATIVISM
AND HYPER—REALISM**

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I. Introduction: Naturalizing Semantics

It seems as though everyone these days is in the business of ‘naturalizing’: epistemologists, philosophers of mind and language, even moral philosophers and philosophers of mathematics. Quine is often cited as the one who started it, but expressions of the naturalizing urge can no doubt be found much earlier in the history of philosophy. Loosely speaking, the naturalizing urge is the desire to fashion human epistemic achievements in particular areas after the achievements of the natural sciences. Naturalists believe that claims to theoretical knowledge in any domain must be measured against the paradigm of knowledge provided by the natural sciences.¹

In contemporary analytic philosophy, this ‘science envy’ may be traced back to the Logical Positivists. But interestingly, the positivists did find – as Schlick put it – a “definite contrast” between “the discovery of *meaning*” and “the discovery of *truth*,” since meaning “is found by mere reflection about possible circumstances in the world,” whereas truth “is decided by really discovering the existence or non-existence of those circumstances” (cf. Rorty 1967: 48f.). This neat separation of meaning and truth allowed the positivists to keep themselves employed, even after they denounced all ‘non-empirical’ disciplines (most notably metaphysics). Philosophy could be of use, as long as it kept to the business of analyzing language, and uncovering meaning.² There is a sense in which, for the positivists, the language one employs in describing the world was itself “not of this world.”³

Along came Quine who, perhaps sensing a certain measure of philosophical disingenuity in the positivists’ conception, urged that language, too, must be studied empirically, as part of the natural world. There is, he insisted, really *no* first philosophy – not even a linguistic one. Reflecting on the application of the empirical approach to the study of language, Quine put forth a skeptical thesis regarding facts of meaning – his famous thesis of the indeterminacy of translation (see, e.g., 1960: Ch.2). The thesis has as a conse-

quence that, beyond a very limited range,⁴ there are no objective semantic facts, at least not of the sort we are intuitively inclined to think there are⁵.

Quine has argued for the thesis that there *are* no facts of 'intuitive semantics' by arguing that there is no way to *determine* uniquely what those alleged facts are. Behind this verificationist move lies the idea we found in the positivists: that our epistemic relation to the facts of 'intuitive semantics' – *if* there were such facts – would have to be different from our relation to other empirical facts. Quine then shares with the positivists what we may call a '*separationist*' intuition. Unlike the positivists, however, Quine refused to make room for semantic facts as knowable a priori or as somehow 'outside the world'. Since he was unable to find an appropriate place *in* the world for such peculiar facts, he opted for eliminating them.

Now, there are many contemporary philosophers who believe they can accept Quine's invitation to 'naturalize' semantics without landing in the abyss of semantic eliminativism. The most popular strategy amongst these philosophers involves, in effect, a rejection of the separationist intuition. The key to a healthy realism about semantics, they maintain, is to treat semantic facts on a full par with other empirical facts, and to see our epistemic relation to them as no different from our epistemic relation to facts studied by the natural sciences.

My subject here is the separationist intuition and its rejection by contemporary semantic naturalists. I will begin by trying to articulate more clearly the separationist intuition, and considering some putative naturalist motivations for rejecting it. I will then examine whether two naturalist conceptions currently on offer – the mentalist conception and the rival conception Michael Devitt develops in *Coming to Our Senses* – succeed in their dismissal of the separationist intuition.

II. The Separationist Intuition

As I mentioned earlier, a relatively recent appearance of the separationist intuition is made in Quine's writings. As you will recall, Quine bases his claim that meaning (intuitively conceived) is *indeterminate* on the claim that specifications of meanings are *underdetermined*: the relevant evidence about any given language could not suffice to determine (beyond a limited range) a unique, empirically motivated specification of the meanings of the expressions of the language. Following Chomsky (1975), critics of Quine have repeatedly pointed out that (by Quine's own admission) underdetermination is the fate of all theories in natural science, yet we do not conclude that there are no facts of the matter anywhere in natural science. Quine has repeatedly responded that the study of language is different, in that "the facts of nature outrun our theories as well as all possible observations," but when it comes to language, "all there is to be right or wrong about" is "verbal behavior" (1987: 9f.).

Quine's response is clearly an expression of a separationist intuition. In various places Quine – and following him Davidson, too – make reference to the 'public' nature of language and the fact that language is a 'social phenomenon'. Their idea is that facts about what expressions mean, about sameness and difference of meaning, etc. must be publicly accessible: they cannot be hidden from us in the way that, say, facts about the chemical structure of substances can be. As a first pass at capturing the separationist intuition, we might then claim that meaning facts, unlike other facts, are subject to a Publicity Requirement.⁶

It is not clear, however, how to understand the Publicity Requirement. Often, people who appeal to the notion of publicity make reference to Wittgenstein's denial of the possibility of a private language.⁷ But that denial concerned logically private meanings – meanings knowable only to an original user. Someone may accept that meanings cannot be private in that sense, yet deny that meanings must be public in the sense that Quine and Davidson have in mind. As recently suggested by Fodor and LePore, there is at least one sense in which all physical facts are "publicly accessible facts par excellence" (1992: 80).⁸ And a recent discussion of the publicity of meaning has appealed to the essential knowability of all truths.⁹ Such liberal readings of the requirement would be of no help in trying to articulate the separationist intuition, since they do not allow us to separate semantic facts from ordinary empirical facts.

Perhaps we can make progress by considering the familiar idea that semantic facts depend on us in a way that the facts of chemistry or biology do not. Of course, to ground the separationist intuition, the dependence in question cannot be merely dependence on our existence – since the facts about, e.g., human anatomy also depend on the existence of human beings. Even dependence on the mind or psychology of speakers may be too weak to sustain the separationist intuition. Facts about the operation of human memory are psychologically dependent on us in that they are facts about human psychology. But such facts may elude us just as much as facts about our anatomy.

I think the separationist intuition may be fueled by some fairly naive considerations such as the following. Consider the possibility that no one has ever known the real chemical structure of iron, or that people have everywhere and always taken two substances which are really distinct to be the same (or vice versa). We ordinarily take such possibilities to make perfect sense (though we suppose them not to obtain). But similar possibilities in the case of language seem to make little sense. Could we sensibly suggest that, e.g., the word "elephant" has always been mispronounced by all (or even most) English speakers? Or that English speakers have always used the wrong word order or formed a passive in the wrong way? Or that they have always misunderstood, or misused, say, the word "chair"; or that no English speaker has ever understood correctly what the word "tomorrow" really meant; or that, contrary to the judgments of all English speakers (ever), two expres-

sions in common use really do (or do not) mean the same?¹⁰ Further, suppose that, due to some cosmic happening, everyone in the English speaking community suddenly came to think the sentence "Have a nice day!" meant what the sentence "Watch your step!" now means. Wouldn't the sentence thereby come to have that meaning?

All this suggests that the difference between facts of language and other facts has to do with our access to, or knowledge of, or judgments about, the respective facts. What's at work here seems to be an epistemic dependence of semantic facts on us, as opposed to their (metaphysical) dependence on our existence and psychology. We might then extract the following claim on behalf of the separationist:

The semantic facts of a language – at least the facts about what expressions in current use mean, or when they have the same or different meanings – cannot be beyond the epistemic capacities of the speakers of the language. Further, such facts depend on speakers' judgments.

I have elsewhere (1992) called this claim "Semantic Verificationism" (SV), since like other verificationist doctrines, it forges a link between the metaphysical and the epistemic in a particular domain – here, semantics. This claim is not to be conflated, however, with the benighted 'Verification Theory of Meaning' of the positivists. The Verification Theory of Meaning identified the meaning of any (assertoric) sentence with the procedures by which it is verified/falsified. Semantic verificationism, on the other hand, requires that certain truths of meaning, specifically, be verifiable by, or accessible to speakers of the language. Thus it is not a theory of meaning, but rather perhaps a constraint on theories of meaning.¹¹ It requires of any acceptable theory of meaning for a language that it not deliver truths concerning what expressions mean, or whether or not two expressions mean the same, which go beyond speakers' epistemic reach.

SV clearly requires some gloss. Thinking first of whole linguistic communities, the intuitive idea behind SV is that the facts about what linguistic expressions mean cannot outrun the semantic judgments of the community as a whole. Features of expressions in common use which are relevant to their interpretation must be discernible by the speakers of the language. A community of speakers cannot systematically misunderstand commonly used expressions – they cannot be largely wrong about what such expressions mean or about whether two expressions mean the same. If the speakers of the language by and large take an expression to mean something (or two expressions to have the same/different meaning) then there could be no room for the discovery that they are all wrong. And if normal linguistic training does not allow any speaker to reach a verdict on what an expression meant, or whether two expressions meant the same, then there could be no further facts to decide the matter.¹² We might sum all this up by saying that, according to SV, there can be no more to the semantic facts of English than English speakers on the whole can make of them.

When considering whole linguistic communities, then, SV provides for a rather stronger epistemic dependence of semantic facts than we would ordinarily acknowledge with respect to, say, chemical or anatomical facts. (In effect, it denies that there can be a global semantic appearance/reality distinction for a whole linguistic community.) But when it comes to *individual* speakers within a linguistic community, SV can be read more modestly. Here the idea would be that, while individual speakers could be systematically wrong about particular meanings, they must at least be in a position to discover, or figure out, what expressions of their language mean or whether two expressions have the same/different meanings.¹³ This would still mean that the epistemic relationship of individual speakers to facts of meaning is not like their relationship to other empirical facts ordinarily conceived.

III. Naturalist Motivations Against Separationism

SV provides at least a way of articulating the separationist intuition. Key notions in SV obviously stand in need of further clarification. But it puts us in a better position to consider why naturalists might be inclined to reject the separationist intuition.

SV and Wholesale Verificationism: While SV seems to say something different from the Verification Theory of Meaning, it may be taken to *imply* verificationism across the board, in any domain. I believe that implicit acceptance of this implication may explain why many realists who believe in the epistemic independence of truth think they *must* deny the epistemic dependence of meaning.

However, as I have argued elsewhere,¹⁴ at least one notable argument that SV implies wholesale verificationism (which can be found in the influential writings of Michael Dummett and Crispin Wright)¹⁵ fails. Very briefly, the Dummettian argument is as follows. If truth is to be epistemically independent of us, as the realist claims, at least some sentences of our language would have to transcend our recognitional capacities – they would have to have ‘verification–transcendent’ truth–conditions. However, realist semantics takes the *meanings* of sentences to consist (at least in part) in their truth–conditions. So a realist would assign as meanings of many sentences truth–conditions which are verification–transcendent. But, goes the argument, sentences with such truth–conditions could not be understood by speakers – speakers could not be said to know their meanings. So if, as semantic verificationism demands, speakers *must* be in a position to know the meanings of sentences, we have to reject the realist notion of verification–transcendent truth.¹⁶

The key to rejecting Dummett’s argument is, I think, denying that speakers cannot know verification–transcendent truth–*conditions*. If realism is true, they may sometimes be unable to determine whether the worldly conditions specified by the meaning of a sentence obtain or not. But a speaker may be able to know *that* such and such are the conditions that would have to obtain for a sentence to be true, even if she is not in a position to know *whether*

the conditions obtain or not.¹⁷ So even if we take meanings to involve 'realist' truth-conditions, we can still maintain that speakers may have the requisite epistemic access to meanings.¹⁸ All that SV implies is that the truth-conditions of sentences *about* meaning could not be verification-transcendent.

SV and 'Cartesianism': A semantic naturalist might still want to reject semantic verificationism as somehow reflecting a dated and objectionable 'Cartesianism' about language. As Devitt characterizes it, Linguistic Cartesianism is the rather prevalent assumption that "linguistic-conceptual competence brings 'privileged access' to meanings (or contents)" (1996: 2). Devitt himself wants to reject Cartesianism because he takes privileged access to imply *a priori* knowledge, and he further takes naturalism to rule out such knowledge. (For Devitt, naturalism is the claim "there is only one way of knowing, the empirical way that is the basis of science" (*ibid.*.)

But it should be pointed out that, although Semantic Verificationism does claim that speakers' epistemic access to semantic facts is different from their access to other facts, it does *not* claim that speakers' knowledge of semantic facts is *a priori*. All it claims is that speakers' knowledge – *however* it is understood – must be possible.¹⁹

SV and Semantic Externalism: SV may be seen as quite directly vitiated by the *externalist* conception of meaning which is adopted by a substantial number of semantic naturalists (Devitt included). The core idea of externalism (as originally presented by Putnam in (1975)) is that what is purely "in speakers' heads" (such as descriptive contents, or analytic definitions) cannot determine the *extension* of terms such as "gold." Putnam's twin-earth examples purport to show that, *insofar as we think of meaning as that which determines reference, meanings ain't in the head*. But semantic verificationism insists that facts about the meanings of expressions depend on what speakers of the language *judge* those facts to be. And this may seem inconsistent with externalism.

What we should notice, however, is that the 'judgment-dependence' of meaning maintained by semantic verificationism does *not* imply that sets of necessary and sufficient descriptions associated by any – or even all – of the speakers with any given term can serve to fix its extension. If externalism is true, then the meanings of at least certain terms contain an external, non-descriptive element. But a semantic verificationist might still insist that it's precisely the semantic judgments of speakers in actual as well as counterfactual situations which determine *whether and which* external elements are relevant to the semantic applicability of a term.²⁰

Externalism makes standing in a certain causal connection to the substance gold a necessary condition on having a term meaning *gold*. But a speaker can satisfy this necessary condition on *meaning* gold by the word "gold," and *also* satisfy whatever conditions we think must be met for having *knowledge* of the word meaning.²¹ For externalism to be consistent with SV,

it must avoid two things. First: making it a necessary condition of knowing the meaning of the word "gold" that a speaker know the chemical composition of gold. And, secondly: making it a necessary condition on knowing the meaning of "gold" that a speaker be able to tell gold apart from twin-like counterfeits (see fn. 21 above). But there are good independent reasons for rejecting *both* these conditions, and neither condition is forced on us by externalism. Of course, the externalist owes us a positive account of knowledge of meaning, given its rejection of the traditional view. My point is, however, that there is no principled obstacle for proposing an externalist view which would obey the SV constraint.

IV. Separationism, Eliminativism and Mentalism

Properly understood, Semantic Verificationism can be divorced from wholesale verificationism, as well as from linguistic Cartesianism and semantic internalism. But one may wonder whether we could accept it without landing in Quinean semantic *eliminativism*. I believe one can – and I myself would prefer to²² – avoid the eliminativist conclusion by rejecting *other* premises at work in the Quinean argument. Right now, however, I am interested in the Chomskian strategy favored by many semantic naturalists which purports to reject Semantic Verificationism.

Very briefly, the Chomskian strategy insists that underdetermination of theory by evidence does not imply indeterminacy of fact in semantics any more than it does in any other domain. But the question arises: what *are* the semantic facts such that they might systematically go beyond all relevant evidence, or 'outrun' our best semantic theory? Here the Chomskian invokes *mentalism*. On a plausible construal (cf. Putnam, 1988: 4ff.), Chomskian mentalism as applied to the study of meaning²³ would hold that there are semantic representations which are innate, universal mental entities and to which all linguistic meanings can somehow be reduced. What meaning an expression has, and whether two expressions have the same or different meaning, depends on what semantic representations are associated with the relevant expressions in the mind/brain of language users. For the mentalist, observable linguistic behavior is only the tip of the semantic iceberg. Semantic reality lies underneath the behavior of speakers, and consists in certain internal occurrences in the minds/ brains of language users.²⁴ The real subject-matter of an empirical semantics would then be not language, but certain aspects of mind. Mentalist semantic theory, like other empirical theories, would require hypotheses which are to be ultimately verified or falsified by reference to matters hidden from plain view: the "inner workings" of speakers' minds.

The Chomskian strategy is usually taken to escape Quinean semantic eliminativism by rejecting his verificationist move from underdetermination to indeterminacy. But I think this is misleadingly oversimplified. To see why, we need to distinguish two kinds of potential underdetermination in the case of language. The linguist engaging in a theoretical study of the language may

face a problem of *theoretical* underdetermination: all available evidence may be compatible with incompatible theories of the language. Here, the Chomskian move to mentalism can be seen as an attempt to improve on behaviorism, by providing a relevant domain of facts which *could* (pace Quine) outrun all behavioral evidence.^{25 26} But there is another potential kind of underdetermination in the linguistic case. Given all the evidence available to *the child* learning a first language, alternative assignments of meaning to linguistic expressions might be possible (this is sometimes dubbed 'the poverty of stimuli' problem). I call this "*ground-level* underdetermination." Ground-level semantic underdetermination would mean that a speaker undergoing normal language acquisition processes might nonetheless end up unable to choose among alternative systematic ways of understanding expressions of their language.

That this is a different kind of problem has been obscured because *both* Quine and Chomsky have encouraged us to think of a child learning a first language as in crucial respects like an amateur theorist of the language they learn.²⁷ The child-linguist analogy appears to make room for the idea of ground-level underdetermination, because it suggests that the child's acquisition of a language consists in an attempt to construct a theory of, say, *English* on the basis of her observations of the evidence available through adult speech. On this picture – which we may call the "'theory' theory" of language acquisition²⁸ – we are to think of the semantic representations the child associates with linguistic expressions as *hypotheses about a certain public language*. Assuming that all theory is underdetermined by evidence, the child's theory (if that's what it is) would be too: there would be competing sets of semantic hypotheses equally compatible with the linguistic evidence available to the child.

This is perhaps the picture suggested by Chomsky in *Syntactic Structures*, and Fodor in *The Language of Thought*. But it goes against a major, more recent strand in Chomskian mentalism. On the current Chomskian picture, the association of particular sets of mental representations with linguistic expressions is not really a matter of choice for the child. Luckily for the child, it is so severely constrained innately that normal exposure to language suffices to determine it. Correlatively, adult speech is not used by the child as *evidence* on the basis of which she constructs a theory concerning some external subject-matter – namely, the semantics of, say, English. Rather, adult speech merely serves as a psychological trigger enabling the child to become a speaker of a particular language.²⁹ But with this loss of choice and of evidence, *we lose the problem of underdetermination for the child*. Chomskian mentalism still allows us to make sense of the possibility of underdetermination *for the linguist*, since the evidence available to her may well underdetermine the correct theoretical decision concerning *which* representations any given speaker associates with expressions.

If this is so, then we must conclude that the linguist and the child are in very different businesses, much to the detriment of the child–linguist analogy. Whereas the child's business is to *acquire* a stable set of mappings from sounds to meanings, the linguist's is to *discover* the facts about *which* set the child has acquired. The linguist's relation to the semantic facts may well be just like that of any empirical theorist to the facts in her domain of investigation, but the child's relation is different. This is because the child's representations are not *for him* a matter for discovery or choice. He simply *comes to have* these representations. And there can be no further question about whether or not his so-called 'hypotheses' are correct. Rather, the representations he associates with expressions are *what determines which language he ends up speaking*. Whereas the linguist needs to determine *which* language the speaker speaks, the speaker simply speaks it.³⁰

So far, I have argued that if, as mentalism maintains, semantic facts consist in facts about the mental representations which speakers associate with linguistic expressions, we must recognize a difference between the child's and the linguist's relation to the semantic facts. Now, with the addition of another element in the Chomskian picture, it turns out that this difference is of epistemic significance. Indeed, it will turn out that *the Chomskian conception, far from rejecting semantic verificationism, is strongly committed to it*.

The additional element is the familiar Chomskian claim that the representations which a linguistic theory attributes to its subjects are some kinds of beliefs, or cognitive judgments. This is part and parcel of the standard Chomskian proposal that we understand linguistic competence in terms of *what speakers know*. A true linguistic theory will attribute to the speakers all and only the linguistic rules which the speaker *can be said to know*.³¹ Speakers, we are told, 'tacitly believe' the truths used by a linguistic theory to describe their competence.³² Now, Chomsky has dismissed objections to construing tacit linguistic belief as a species of ordinary belief as mere pedantic quibble. But he has also remarked that "[s]ince a language has no objective existence apart from its mental representation, *we need not distinguish between 'system of beliefs' and 'knowledge', in this case.*" (1972: 169, my emphasis)³³ So, although Chomsky wants to preserve the connection between linguistic knowledge and ordinary knowledge, he seems to recognize that when it comes to language, individuals *must* be in a position to possess the relevant knowledge. But then it *is* the case after all that speakers must be in a position to know the semantic facts of their language, though they may be ignorant of ordinary empirical facts. Semantic facts, unlike other empirical facts, would be strongly dependent on speakers' judgments. The separationist intuition is vindicated.

Notice that the Semantic Verificationism I am attributing to the Chomskian mentalist concerns the relation of speakers to the semantic facts of their *own* language – their idiolects, if you will. It does not concern their relation to public languages. However, Chomsky (as well as Fodor) have little patience with

public languages, and little desire to secure an objective status for them.³⁴ It is not unfair to say that the Chomskian position with respect to public languages is eliminativist. *A fortiori*, then, it does not escape eliminativism by rejecting semantic verificationism when it comes to public languages. Finally, it still remains possible for the Chomskian mentalist to reject Semantic Verificationism concerning the relation of speakers to the semantic facts of *others'* idiolects. If Chomskian mentalism is right, speakers' interpretation of *others'* speech may well be on an epistemic par with their other empirical investigations.³⁵

The earlier point, concerning a speaker's own language, remains however. Chomskian mentalism must acknowledge that speakers enjoy a much more intimate epistemic relation to the semantic facts of *their own* language than they do to other empirical facts, or to the semantic facts of others' language.³⁶

V. Separationism and Devitt's Semantic Naturalism

In view of this result, one may conclude that the separationist intuition can, after all, be accommodated by semantic naturalists. Alternatively, one may become suspicious of Chomskian mentalism as the correct naturalist answer to Quine. This is, I take it, Michael Devitt's position in *Coming to Our Senses*. Our discussion may help bring out Devitt's hostility to Chomskian mentalism. I have in effect argued that the Chomskian mentalist, who traffics in speakers' knowledge of semantic facts, is committed to the claim that speakers have a privileged epistemic relation to the facts of one's own language, as contrasted with their relation to *both* ordinary empirical facts *and* facts about *other people's* language. The Chomskian mentalist ultimately endorses the view Devitt dubs "Linguistic Cartesianism," which cannot be reconciled with naturalism as Devitt understands it. Indeed, Devitt gives as one example of linguistic Cartesianism the claim that "semantic competence alone yields semantic propositional knowledge" of truth-conditions (1996: 2). Interestingly, Fodor himself has, of late, found reason to steer away from this latter claim. Speaking on the issue of the child's epistemic situation, he says:

[The child] differs from the linguist in that his background assumptions aren't justified by bootstrapping. In fact, they aren't justified *at all*. *A fortiori*, his choice of a T-theory on the basis of the observational evidence together with these assumptions *does not yield justified true belief*, and thus does not yield *knowledge* (...). But then, there is no reason to suppose that children (or anybody except, maybe, a few linguists) *do* have knowledge of their language in *that* sense. What is truistic is only that children know their language in the sense that they are able to talk it, ... (1992: 77)³⁷

Fodor is here apparently advocating a rather un-Chomskian separation between the child's linguistic *competence* and her linguistic *judgments*. This separation is at the heart of Devitt's naturalist picture. Let me briefly sketch what I take this picture to be. Devitt accepts something like the distinction I proposed earlier between the ground-level and the theoretical level. At the

theoretical level, we have empirical semanticists studying semantic facts. For Devitt, unlike the mentalist, semantic facts are just as Grandma would conceive of them: they concern symbols and their meaning properties (1989:515). Linguistics is about linguistic symbols, not about individual speakers' psychology. But contrary to what Grandma might expect, linguistics is just like other empirical theories; it would yield scientific knowledge, not necessarily possessed by ordinary speakers.

Now, at the ground-level we simply have speakers' semantic *competence* – their ability to speak a particular public language. Devitt believes it is best to see this ability as a *practical* ability, a know-how, which requires no theoretical knowledge of semantic facts *about* the language. Semantic competence need involve no metalinguistic judgments; a speaker can know what words mean without having any judgments about words or about meaning. To 'know what words mean' is simply to be able to *do* certain things with them, to have certain linguistic skills. Ordinary speakers do, in fact, make various linguistic judgments – they have 'linguistic intuitions'. But such intuitive judgments are in no way implicated by their competence as speakers.³⁸ Rather, they constitute a 'folk linguistic theory', on a par with folk chemistry, folk anatomy, etc. Folk linguistics is nothing more than a primitive theory about the symbols of a language. (See *op.cit.*, p.521f., and 1996: 2.2.)

On Devitt's view, the semantic facts of English *can* be as far beyond the epistemic reach of speakers as ordinary empirical facts. There is no constitutive relation between speakers' judgments and the facts about the (public) language they speak. And he denies that speakers enjoy any more than an accidentally privileged knowledge of these facts. (cf. 1996: 2.10.)

...[O]rdinary semantic intuitions are ... parts of an empirical, fallible, and certainly inadequate set of folk opinions or, more pretentiously, 'folk theory', the linguistic wisdom of the ages. (1996: 54)

From the naturalistic perspective, semantic intuitions are like intuitions in any other science: open to revision in the face of empirical theory. We could be wrong about what has a putative meaning. We could be wrong in thinking that anything has it. (1996: 80).

For Devitt, though semantic facts do depend on speakers' existence, in that speakers and their activities can be said to *produce* meanings, they do not exhibit any epistemic dependence on speakers. Presumably, speakers – even a whole linguistic community – could be largely wrong in their judgments concerning what their words mean. They could fail to know what words mean even while being competent users of them; and they need not even be in a position to discover what meanings expressions they use have. This is clearly in direct opposition to SV and the separationist intuition.

The Chomskian mentalist conception, I have argued, fails to reject Semantic Verificationism because it ultimately ties semantic facts of an individual's language to the individual's judgments. By contrast, the conception advocated

by Devitt divorces semantic reality from speakers' judgments by denying that speakers' semantic knowledge is at all a matter of *judgments*. We need a name for this conception of semantic facts. I'll call it the "*naturalist, hyper-realist*" conception. ("*Hyper*" because, contrary to Grandma's expectation, it takes all semantic properties to be entirely independent of what we, language users, may make of them.)

The hyper-realist conception stays clear of Chomskian mentalism in two striking ways. First, it takes linguistics to be the empirical study of language, not of aspects of mind or psychology. Secondly, it takes speakers' linguistic knowledge to be not a matter of propositional knowledge of the truths delivered by a linguistic theory, but rather purely a matter of know-how, a practical skill.³⁹ It is this combination of views that enables it to avoid Semantic Verificationism.

Conclusion

If this is right, then Devitt's hyper-realist approach should seem more promising than Chomskian mentalism for those who want to reject Semantic Verificationism. But we must not forget the main motivation behind this rejection: namely, avoiding Quinean semantic eliminativism. Recall that the Chomskian effort to reject Quinean eliminativism involved interposing something between symbols and behavior so as to pin down meaning. Crudely, whether a symbol means *rabbit* or *undetached rabbit parts* is not something which can be read off the symbol itself, nor can it be read off the behavior involving the symbol. Grandma would still insist that there's a fact of the matter about which one the English symbol means. And the Chomskian mentalist allows her to say that: it's a matter of what goes on in the minds of the symbol's users.

But the hyper-realist, as we saw, wants to do away with the mentalist middle-mind. He takes the meanings linguistic expressions actually have to be quite independent of the judgments speakers make – of how speakers 'take' these expressions (though they are not independent of speakers' existence and activities). So wherein, we might ask, lie the facts which would serve to fix which of the available alternative's gives the symbol's meaning? Devitt would no doubt want us to consider, in addition to behavior, causal relations to the external environment. But arguably, even behavior together with such causal relations will not give reason enough to select between the kinds of alternative specifications of meaning under consideration. So-called 'intuitive semantics' would have us distinguish even amongst alternatives which would generate the same truth-conditions. For this reason, Quine has opted for eliminating intuitive meanings.

Our hyper-realist, by contrast, promises a more or less robust realism about meaning. But he operates under rather severe constraints. Not only are the hyper-realist's meaning facts to be *natural* facts, but they are also to be divorced from the psychology of speakers, and they are to be completely

independent of their judgments. I, for one, have come away from reading *Coming to Our Senses* wondering how precisely someone operating under these constraints could stay clear of Quinean semantic eliminativism. I believe Quinean eliminativism poses a challenge to the hyper-realist, one which cannot be trivially dismissed.

Notes

1. This is deliberately vague, because under the 'naturalist' umbrella one finds a very wide range of requirements, ranging from a demand of strict reduction to the truths of some basic science to the very mild requirement of not appealing to any 'super' natural explanations. For instance, one might take being a naturalist to involve rejecting abstract entities/Platonism (see e.g., Wettstein, *Has Semantics Rested on a Mistake*, pp.144f.). By contrast, Quine, an arch-naturalist, takes it to involve no such thing, since he thinks the natural sciences are ontologically committed to abstract entities.

Sometimes naturalism is conflated with physicalism. And, like the doctrine of physicalism, it sometimes appears in epistemic and sometimes metaphysical versions. For a useful discussion of the varieties of naturalism, see Stroud (1996).

2. This is the essence of the positivists' "linguistic turn" (cf. Rorty 1967: 8), characterized by a new, antimetaphysical "first philosophy." The new first philosophy had as its business the analysis of the linguistic systems we employ in our scientific pursuit of truth. Such analysis, the positivists thought, can be achieved through systematic a priori philosophical reflection. The syntactic and semantic facts about the linguistic systems were supposed to be knowable prior to empirical investigation, and immune from the relativity to language which infected all other (empirical) facts.

3. I here borrow from Romanos (1983: 32). Romanos finds "more than a slight Kantian flavor... [in] the positivist program" (1983: 23); he takes the positivists to have replaced Kant's inquiry into the 'conditions of the possibility of human knowledge' with an inquiry into the 'conditions of the possibility of meaningful discourse' (ibid.).

4. Marked by observation sentences conceived holophrastically.

5. Like many eliminativists, Quine would presumably insist that he is not denying that there are semantic facts – there are, after all, facts about the dispositions of speakers to verbal (and other behavior), and, for him, this all there is to semantics. But his indeterminacy thesis has as a consequence that (again, beyond a limited range) there are no determinate facts of the matter of the form "expression E (of language L) means that (or refers to) ..." – no facts of so-called 'intuitive semantics'. For discussion, see my 1986, 1990, 1992b, and 1993.

6. Quine has often attributed his linguistic behaviorism to a concern about the public nature of language. For instance:

In psychology one may or may not be a behaviorist, but in linguistics one has no choice... (1990: 37)

... Language is a social art which we all acquire on the evidence solely of other people's overt behaviour under publicly recognizable circumstances. (1969: 26)

... In acquiring it we have to depend entirely on intersubjectively available cues as to what to say and when. (1960: ix).

And see also Quine's (1969: 26ff.), (1970) and (1986). (For discussion of the role of publicity

in Quine's persistent preference for behaviorism over mentalism in the study of language, see my (1992b).)

Echoing Quine, Davidson says: "As a matter of principle, .. meaning .. [is] open to public determination. ...What a fully informed interpreter could learn about what a speaker means is all there is to learn ...". (1986: 315) "That meanings are decipherable is not a matter of luck; public availability is a constitutive aspect of language." (1990: 314) And also:

Language is in nature, as Neurath insisted, intersubjective: what someone else's words mean on occasion is always something that we can in principle learn from public cues. (in LePore 1986: 332).

Mental phenomena in general may or may not be private, but the correct interpretation of one person's speech by another must in principle be possible. ... (1990: 314)

It is interesting to note that both Quine and Davidson seem to see public availability as unique to the semantic realm even as compared with the mental realm more generally.

Appeals to the public nature of meaning have been made by many other authors (Frege, Wittgenstein, Dummett, Putnam – to name a few). For discussion and bibliography, see Stjernberg (1991). See also and more recently: Wettstein (1991) and Bilgrami (1992).

7. See, e.g., Quine:

...My aversion [to the mental], within its limits, has a reason: the want of intersubjective checkpoints. It is Wittgenstein's rejection of private language. It is this, and not mentality as such, that disqualifies any irreducibly intuitive notion of meaning or synonymy or semantic relevance... (in Schilpp 1986: 74, my emphases)

8. Fodor and LePore make this suggestion in their attack on the use Davidson makes of the principle that, in meaning, "nothing is hidden." They point out that, if we recognize all physical facts as publicly accessible, and put no restrictions on whom the relevant facts must be accessible to, then we get the result that the Publicity Requirement can be met by all facts knowable by an omniscient being which either are or supervene on the physical facts (see op. cit., p.80f.).

9. Cf. Bilgrami (1992: 210).

10. Jonathan Bennett, for instance, describes as "ludicrous" the suggestion that "no one has ever known what any part of our language really means," and connects this observation with the idea that "what an expression means in language L is logically connected with what the users of L generally mean by it" (1976: 8).

11. Quine has in several places expressed allegiance to the verification theory of meaning (see, e.g., 1969: 80). On the face of it, however, this view of meaning would seem in tension with his claim that the truths of objective science could "outrun our theories as well as all possible observation" (1987: 10). This is because endorsing the verification theory of meaning may be tantamount to espousing wholesale verificationism: the view that no facts can in principle outrun our judgments.

12. Defending Quine and Davidson's views on meaning, Føllesdal put forward a thesis he called "Man-Made Meanings": "The meaning of a linguistic expression is the joint product of all the evidence that helps learners and users of the language determine that meaning" (in Barrett and Gibson eds, 1990: 103). Føllesdal thinks this thesis "follows ... from our taking the social, public nature of language seriously" (ibid.). For reasons that I hope will become clear, I would want to shun formulation in terms of evidence. But the idea is closely related to that behind SV, namely, that the facts of meaning depend on what speakers 'make' of them (or take them to

13. Procedures for discovery or figuring out include, but are not restricted to, checking with dictionaries or other speakers. Although normally one checks for meanings by consulting dictionaries or other speakers, I do not think the procedures available to a speaker are exhausted by these. It does not seem to me impossible for one to figure out (or discover) what a word means even if one is left alone speaking a public language after all dictionaries have been destroyed.

14. Bar-On (1996).

15. See, e.g., Dummett (1991: esp. essays 4–6, 14–15) and Wright (1987: esp. essays 1, 6, 7).

16. Notice that the Dummettian argument begins with a separationist intuition but ends up obliterating it, since it turns out in the end that all truths, and not only truths about meanings are judgment-dependent. This should give separationists a reason to reject his argument.

17. Consider, for example, a sentence which, by Dummett's lights, has verification-transcendent truth-conditions: "There were 12,876 tiles in Julius Caesar's bath." Assuming time-travel is impossible, a speaker of English could not be in a position to verify whether these conditions obtained or not. But why can't a speaker of English know what the truth-conditions of the sentence are? She would know them in virtue of being able to construct them. As long as the speaker understands the various vocabulary items and the existential quantifier, and has mastered the relevant composition rules, she can put together these materials to generate the sentence's truth-conditions. This constructive ability need not be thought to require the ability to verify (directly or indirectly) or to recognize whether the constructed conditions obtain or not. The knowledgeable judgments which speakers can make about the meanings of sentences need not consist in recognitional judgments about the worldly circumstances under which the sentences would be true or false.

18. And, of course, one may deny that meanings must consist in (or even involve as an ingredient) 'realist' truth-conditions. I neglect this option here because I want to keep alive the idea that many of our sentences could be true or false in a verification-transcendent way; and I have not here argued that that can be so even if the meanings of our sentences do not consist in/involve verification-transcendent truth-conditions. For relevant discussion see Devitt (1991: Ch.14).

19. It is true that in the positivists one finds an association of SV with the idea of apriority; but that may be an artefact of their thinking of language on the model of formal languages, where one has apriori access to the linguistic facts due to the fact that one stipulates the rules.

20. As far as I can see, accepting the insights of externalism is consistent even with the view that the semantic rules for determining the extension of those terms are still "in speakers' heads," in the sense that what the rules are is itself dependent on speakers' judgments. (This is, of course, not to say that the relevant rules can be specified in terms of descriptive necessary and sufficient conditions.) For relevant discussion, see my (1992a: section 4).

Consider again a hypothetical cosmic happening of the kind described earlier, which results in speakers' coming to think that, say, the word "water" now means what the word "elephant" used to mean. I see no reason why one could not maintain an externalist view of meaning (or a causal theory about extension determination) of the relevant terms and yet agree that such cosmic happenings would indeed lead to a change of meaning. To remain faithful to externalism, one would simply have to refuse to describe any change in the extension of terms which might result from the change of meaning merely in terms of changes in the descriptive contents speakers have come to associate with the terms.

21. There is no reason why an externalist should hold that, for speakers to know the meaning of the word "gold," they must be able to distinguish the worldly substance gold from every

possible counterfeit. This would put unreasonably high demands on knowledge of meaning (as compared with other kinds of knowledge – perceptual knowledge, for instance). (See, e.g., Burge 1994.)

Just to consider an example, suppose one has a general reliabilist theory of knowledge. Very roughly, to know that *p*, you must have a true belief that *p*, formed through the operation of a reliable mechanism. Adapting this to the case of meaning, an externalist might suggest that, to know that a certain expression means such and such, one must have a reliably formed belief that the expression has that meaning. Nothing in the externalist condition on meaning such and such prevents speakers from reliably forming beliefs about what expressions of their language mean. What the semantic verificationist would add here is that speakers must be in a position to form such reliable beliefs. But, as far as I can see, that does not make matters any worse for an externalist.

22. See my 1992b, and "Semantic Eliminativism and the 'Theory' Theory of Language" (in preparation).

23. As Putnam points out (op.cit.), Chomsky's mentalism has concerned explicitly only syntax. The application of Chomsky's ideas to semantics is primarily due to Fodor (1975, and elsewhere).

24. We can distinguish (Cartesian) dualist mentalism – the view that the representations which are said to constitute meanings are features of disembodied Cartesian minds – from the more fashionable physicalist (or physicalist–functionalist) mentalism – which takes the representations to be features of a mental mechanism which is physically realized in speakers' bodies. Quine, himself a self-proclaimed physicalist, rejects linguistic mentalism even in its physicalist version.

25. As Quine puts it, the mentalist refuses to construe "the very facts about meaning in terms of behavior," and "regard[s] a man's semantics as somehow determinate in his mind beyond what might be implicit in his dispositions to overt behavior" (Quine 1969: 27).

26. The move to mental facts also opens up the possibility of broadening significantly the range of relevant evidence, so that theories which are equally compatible with all behavioral evidence may be ruled out on the basis of other pertinent evidence.

27. In probing a language, Quine tells us, both child and linguist use as their data "the concomitances of utterance and observable ... situation" (1969: 81) (See also (1976: 58), and my (1992b: 97ff.) for discussion. And Chomsky has invited us to see "[t]he problem for the linguist, as well as for the child learning the language" as that of "determining from the data of performance the underlying system of the rules" that govern the language (1975: 4). Applying this idea to the case of semantics, Fodor has argued that this determination involves forming hypotheses about (at least) the extensions of predicates of the language learned, and thus requires that the learner already possess a language in which to frame the relevant hypotheses. This would be the child's language of thought, which, on pain of regress, cannot be learned, so must be innate. Fodor also carries this idea directly over to adult linguistic understanding and interpretation. A mature hearer's understanding of an utterance made by a speaker consists in a translation of the utterance into the hearer's language of thought. (Also, see below.)

28. For my discussion, see references in note 22 above.

29. See, e.g., Chomsky (1986: 15–17, 62–65, 133–135).

30. The linguist's theory then is not an underdetermined theory of an underdetermined ('ground-level') theory. This can be contrasted with another empirical theory – a 'naturalistic epistemology' – which studies the ground-level beliefs people have about the external world. Such a theory would provide a genuine instance of an underdetermined theory of an underdetermined theory. I am arguing that empirical semantics as conceived by the mentalist is not like that. (Again, see note 22 for references.)

31. For some discussion of the propositional knowledge assumption (as well as relevant references to Chomsky and Fodor), see Devitt & Sterelney (1989: section 3).

32. For discussion and references, see the articles by Davies and Higginbotham in George, ed. (1989).

33. See also: "One could perhaps take the intuitionist view of mathematics as being not unlike the linguistic view of grammar" (1982: 16). And: "Knowing everything about the mind/brain, ... there is not the slightest reason to suppose that there are truths of language that would still escape our grasp" (1986: 33). This last pronouncement is, however, probably best understood as a statement of metaphysical supervenience, despite the epistemological guise.

34. See Chomsky (1986).

35. As Fodor describes it, a hearer's understanding of an utterance made by another speaker consists in a translation of the utterance into the hearer's language of thought. And determining the appropriate translation will be a matter of deciding "which hypothesis about the speaker's [communicative] intentions best explains his (the speaker's) verbal behavior" (1975: 108, fn.7). This would just be an instance of inference to the best explanation (as Fodor remarks).

36. Readers familiar with Davidson's view may be struck by the convergence between Fodor's view and his on various key points. Like Fodor, Davidson is skeptical about public languages (he thinks "there is no such a thing as language," if by 'language' we mean public language such as English). He tailors his theory of meaning to individual speakers, and thinks the relationship between an individual and her own idiolect is different from the relationship she has to others' idiolects, in that one's understanding of others' speech -- but not of one's own -- is a matter of constructing an empirical theory based on available evidence concerning what they intend to convey (see e.g., 1986: 445f.). However, Davidson thinks (while Fodor denies) that meanings must be "decipherable," that "public availability is a constitutive aspect of language" (1990:314).

37. There is a strand in Chomsky's writing which leads in the same direction. It is the claim that language learning is akin to the development of a biological organ. Needless to say, this strand is in tension with the more 'cognitivist' pronouncements, which place emphasis on knowledge of language.

38. I would argue that such judgments are necessary to account for speakers' competence with propositional attitude ascriptions. But this argument would have to wait for another occasion.

39. While I think Devitt is right to be suspicious of the Chomskian propositional conception of semantic knowledge, I side with Dummett (and others) in thinking that the 'mere know-how' view doesn't do justice to the nature of speakers' semantic competence, at least as long as we hold as a paradigm of such knowledge skills such as bicycle riding or swimming. I think Dummett is right that semantic competence especially, in contrast with phonological and even much of syntactic competence, puts a serious strain on the dichotomy between theoretical or propositional knowledge and pure practical knowledge. We need to hear more than Coming to Our Senses says about the nature of the skills which allegedly comprise linguistic knowledge. The skills Devitt does mention, such as the ability to make certain meaning-relevant inferences, "the skill of matching sentences and thoughts that are .. alike [in meaning-relevant structures]" (1989: 517), and the ability to use that-clauses, all sound suspiciously 'propositional'. At the very least, one would like to see an explanation of these abilities which does not invoke any propositional knowledge or semantic judgments.

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