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## UNDERSTANDING SEMANTIC SCEPTICISM<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Arguments for scepticism about meaning

In his landmark study of Wittgenstein, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, Kripke takes Wittgenstein to claim that “There can be no such thing as meaning anything by any word” (1982: 55). This is scepticism in the ontological sense – there are no meanings – rather than the epistemological sense – we don’t know what those meanings are.

The core thesis can be restated in various ways to make its relationship to key theoretical notions more explicit. The following forms emphasise the bearing of the thesis on the notion of sentence meaning and speaker meaning respectively.

- (1) No sentence expresses any proposition.
- (2) No speaker means any proposition by their utterances.

My purpose in this paper is to make sense of claims of this sort and show how they might be potentially fruitful and useful to linguistics and our understanding of language, rather than defending the arguments in support of scepticism, but it is worthwhile rehearsing the main considerations in its favour just to prevent possible distractions.

The number one consideration in favour of scepticism about reference is what I call the “too many candidates” argument. It says there are too many equally qualified candidates for being the meanings of words of a language. The candidates disagree among themselves, so they cannot *all* be interpretations of the language. And since the candidates are all tied, none of them can be the interpretation. Hence, the language has no meaning. We see arguments of this broad type in Quine (1960), for example, as well as Putnam (1981) and Kripke (1982). I will briefly rehearse just Kripke's argument here.

Kripke asks what fact about a person could constitute the difference

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between meaning one mathematical function by “+” rather than another and concludes, since no plausible fact or truthmaker can be found, that it is not true that one means one function rather than another.

It cannot simply be a brute, primitive or *sui-generis* fact about one that one means addition by “+”. Meaning something by something is too complex a sort of thing to be taken as primitive and admitting no explanation. But that one means *addition* by “+” rather than some other function cannot be a fact about one’s actual current and past behaviour (and physiology, experience, mental states... and whatever else is relevant), simply because this set of facts eliminates only a minority of the alternative interpretations of “+” – the ones incompatible with one’s actual history. It leaves unconfirmed that one means *addition* by “+” rather than different functions that differ from *addition* only with respect to unconsidered cases. Finally, facts about one’s possible behaviour (physiology etc.) – such as one’s dispositions – don’t adequately discriminate between *addition* and all other functions as interpretations of “+”, because one’s actual dispositions include a propensity to err – that is, not to conform to *addition* – and this propensity cannot be “factored out”, as it were, taking one’s actual dispositions to be the product of a disposition to add together with dispositions to fail to add for various reasons, because that strategy simply presupposes that one has a disposition to add without providing the grounds to substantiate it. After all, one’s actual dispositions can also be factored into a disposition to conform to some entirely different function together with additional dispositions to fail to conform to it. The fact, if there is one, that makes it the case that one means *addition* by “+” must be something else besides the availability of a notional factorization into a disposition to add and perturbing influences.

So, to summarise, semantic scepticism says that our sentences mean nothing because we can find no truth-maker for assigning them a definite meaning.

## 2. Objections to scepticism about meaning

### 2.1 Boghossian’s direct argument

Semantic scepticism is often thought to be self-undermining. For example, Scott Soames claims that

... there is an important sense in which the sceptic’s argument is self-undermining; if one succeeds in stating the argument, or in justifying one’s belief in the conclusion, then that very fact falsifies the conclusion. (Soames 1998: 213).

The self-underminingness Soames finds is pragmatic in nature. It comes from scepticism’s being evidence against its own truth, because *stating* it is something

we could not do if it were true. A statement can serve as evidence in this situation because, as Soames notes

... stating the sceptic's argument is not just a matter of uttering the words, but rather involves taking up genuine propositional attitudes towards the contents expressed by those words. (Soames 1998: 213, n2).

It follows that if there is a statement, there is a content of the statement, so the existence of a statement like (1) apparently empirically disconfirms it. This is a forceful and intuitive challenge to scepticism. I address it fully in Section 2.2, but turn first to a direct argument against the sceptical thesis.

Paul Boghossian (1989, 1990) argues directly that scepticism formulated as (1) above leads to contradiction.<sup>2</sup> His target (cf. Boghossian 1990: 174f) is essentially a meta-linguistic version of formulation (1). He terms it an error-theoretic version of scepticism, because it calls all sentences of a given kind false (though this terminological point is not important for present purposes).

(1s) All sentences of the form "S has truth condition p" are false.

This claims that certain claims of semantic discourse, namely any sentence ascribing a truth-condition to a sentence, are false. Boghossian argues that we can deduce a contradiction from (1s). I reconstruct his argument as follows.

Suppose for *reductio* that some sentence had a truth condition

(3)  $S_i$  has truth condition  $p_i$ .

Then

(4) "S<sub>i</sub> has truth condition p<sub>i</sub>" is true (by the (dis)quotational properties of the truth predicate).

But

(5) "S<sub>i</sub> has truth-condition p<sub>i</sub>" is false (by 1s), which contradicts (4) allowing us to discharge the assumption of (3) and infer

(6)  $S_i$  does not have truth condition  $p_i$

and since  $i$  is arbitrary,

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Kusch (2006) deploys a similar argument against an alternative formulation.

(7) For no S or p, does S have truth condition p.<sup>3</sup>

But, Boghossian continues, what (1s) *says* is that all truth-condition-attributing sentences are false. And these sentences cannot be false unless they have truth conditions to begin with. Hence, (1s) implies both that truth-condition-attributing sentences have truth conditions and that they do not have them. This is a contradiction (cf. Boghossian 1990: 174-175 – numbering changed).

As Boghossian says here, (1s), together with certain assumptions to be examined presently, implies a contradiction (namely that certain sentences have truth-conditions because they are false and that no sentence has truth conditions (including the previous ones)). Hence (1s) is false.

The argument, however, fails if we distinguish sentences from propositions and take propositions to be the bearers of truth and falsity. The sentence that purports to say that no sentence expresses a proposition should be distinguished from its being true that no sentence expresses a proposition. These entities are distinct existences, metaphysically speaking, according to the traditional picture at least.<sup>4</sup> I am suggesting that scepticism can be formulated as the *doctrine*, or *thesis* or *proposition* that no sentence, linguistic or mental expression, expresses a proposition (where doctrines, theses and propositions are distinct from sentences). The view is of a piece with the traditional picture in that the distinction is drawn between sentences and the more abstract things that sentences are supposed to refer to or mean.

Now, when this distinction is properly maintained, the first (reconstructed) stages proceed acceptably, but the second (quoted) part cannot be completed because (1p) and (7p) don't stand in right relations to each other.

Translate the argument into the old-fashioned semantic discourse of propositions. For “S is true” say “it is true that p”, and for “S has truth condition p” say “S expresses p”.

(1p) All propositions of the form “S expresses p” are false.

Suppose for *reductio* that

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<sup>3</sup> Boghossian emphasises in both Boghossian (1990) and Boghossian (1989) that irrealist conceptions of content “go global”, that is, their sceptical conclusions cannot be restricted to discourse about meaning alone. This argument gives one clear demonstration of this. It says *no* sentence expresses a proposition, not no meaning ascription expresses a proposition. However, the presumption that it should ever have been local is purely based on the analogy with other forms of irrealism (about particular discourses), and it is not clear Kripke ever had the more limited goal in mind.

<sup>4</sup> On the traditional picture, propositions are initially introduced to capture what is common between sentences that mean the same thing (e.g. *J'ai faim*, *I am hungry*, *Ich habe Hunger* etc.).

(3p)  $S_i$  expresses  $p_i$

It would appear to follow, given an orthodox understanding of truth, that

(4p) It is true that  $S_i$  expresses  $p_i$

But, by (1p)

(5p) it is false that  $S_i$  expresses  $p_i$

(4p) and (5p) contradict each other. Hence

(6p)  $S_i$  does not express  $p_i$

And  $i$  is arbitrary, hence

(7p) No sentence expresses any proposition.

So far so good, (1p) implies (7p) just like (1s) implied (7), but Boghossian's original argument concludes because, as well as (7), (1s) implied, via the principle that if a sentence is false, then it has a truth condition, the claim that a certain class of sentences have truth-conditions. Is there a similar implication from (1p)? Seemingly not. Propositions and sentences are distinct existences. It is not obvious why certain propositions being false should guarantee that any sentences express propositions – especially when the false propositions in question are propositions of form “ $S$  expresses  $p$ ”. In Boghossian's original argument we can find a contradiction because of the connection between having a truth-*value* and having a truth-*condition* (if something has the former it also has the latter), and because the same types of thing, sentences, have or don't have both these properties. But where truth or falsity is a property of propositions and expressing a proposition (formerly “having a truth-condition”) is a property of sentences, no single thing is the subject of contradictory predicates. (1p) is about all propositions and (7p) is about all sentences. So they don't stand to each other in the way required to get a contradiction as in the previous argument. It wouldn't help to rephrase (1p) as:

(1s') All sentences of the form “ $S$  expresses  $p$ ” express propositions (that are false).

For while (1s') is about sentences, it is not acceptable to the semantic sceptic who denies that any sentence expresses a proposition. So Boghossian cannot use (1s') to state the thesis of semantic scepticism. Therefore this argument fails.

## 2.2. Pragmatic absurdity 1: Conditions on an adequate response

Responding to Boghossian in this way does nothing to dispel the air of paradox attaching to scepticism. The sceptic grants that if the thesis of scepticism is true, namely that no sentence expresses a proposition, then no sentence expresses that thesis. No sentence states it, not even (1) itself. But, surely, the thesis has been stated, right? Kripke states it (quote above). (1) states it. We are thinking of it now. How could we be doing that if not by dint of some sentence or thought that stands for the thesis? Hence Soames' point: if we are thinking about that thesis, then it must be false.

Responding to the intuitive force of this challenge requires recognising the assumptions and principles that drive it. This requires first that we accept Soames' explicitly noted commitment to a propositional attitude conception of understanding. That is, to state the thesis is to stand in a relation to that thesis. Understanding is a kind of fastening upon a proposition (and propositions are probably extra-mental communicable entities) – obviously, one way for the sceptic to dodge the objection here would be to insist on some alternative account of understanding. In my opinion, any serious attempt to accept scepticism and work out its consequences ought to reject and revise the propositional attitude picture of understanding, replacing it with the view that understanding is a kind of practical capacity (to use and/or respond to words, sentences or calls), but in the present dialectic, such a move would be weak and *ad hoc* (a case of defending the implausible by the implausible).<sup>5</sup>

The second requirement on a satisfactory response to the challenge is that we accept that we *do in fact understand* and can *think about* the thesis of semantic scepticism. This is known by first-personal introspection. Taking the challenge seriously requires we take for granted that we are not mistaken about *which* thought we're thinking. It licences us to discount, for example, the suggestion that it merely *seems to us* that we are thinking about semantic scepticism rather than something else.

Finally carefully attend to the distinction between sentences and propositions.<sup>6</sup> It is, in the first instance, propositions that are true (or not), and that are understood (or not). Sentences are true or understood derivatively and in a manner of speaking to the extent that they express propositions that are more properly true or understood. The thesis of scepticism is a proposition. What follows, if we assume it is true?

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<sup>5</sup> The sceptic might find congenial aspects of the non-sceptical versions of the conception of semantic knowledge as practical advanced by Robert Brandom (1994) and Jennifer Hornsby (2005) among others (though almost certainly not *vice versa*).

<sup>6</sup> The strategy to be presented below does not presuppose any particular account of propositions.

- No sentence (of a natural language or Mentalese) expresses it.
- No sentence (of a natural language or Mentalese) expresses anything.
- No sentence (of a natural language or Mentalese) is true or understood.

The sceptic must reconcile this situation with the patent fact that we do understand the thesis. This is primarily a task of clarifying the nature of the relationship between sentences, like Kripke's (quoted) and (1), and the propositions we *do* understand through engaging with them, yet which they apparently *don't* express.

### 2.3. Pragmatic absurdity II: The conditions satisfied

It is sufficient if the sceptic holds that a sentence that does not *express* a proposition can nevertheless 'put someone in mind' of it, that is put one into a propositional attitude to it. This thought requires a little unpacking. The point is perhaps best approached through considering some examples. These are examples, as one might put it, of understanding the meaningless, that is, understanding something that does not express a proposition.<sup>7</sup>

Example one: Incredulous Stares.

David Lewis understood incredulous stares. People stared at him incredulously and he came to understand on that basis that people found genuine modal realism incredible and had trouble believing that he believed it. Yet incredulous stares do not express propositions, even the proposition that people find modal realism incredible and have trouble believing that Lewis believed it.

Example Two: Severed heads (from Grice 1989: 218)

King Herod presented Salome with the severed head of St John the Baptist. He intended her to believe that St John was dead. She did. But, as Grice said, Herod did not mean that St John the Baptist is dead by that act. None of these things, neither the severed head, nor the gesture, nor the presentation mean that St John the Baptist is dead.

These two examples should show, from an intuitive perspective, that, something that does not bear any semantic relation to a proposition can 'put' one into

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<sup>7</sup> Strictly, this is "understanding" in a loose sense, since the object of the understanding is not a proposition but something else. Officially, this paper stays with the orthodox conception of understanding as a propositional attitude. However, it is the loose sense that is at issue in the intuitive challenge to scepticism, since sentences are not propositions either. If we understand sentences, it must be in the loose sense.

a relation of understanding to that proposition. Clearly they do not *represent* the propositions understood in each example, but they are (in part) causally responsible for the agent thinking those propositions (on that occasion). The mechanism whereby this happens, since by hypothesis is not semantic, may be causal or mechanical. The stimulus *stimulates*, or *provokes*, or *triggers*, or *irritates*, or *pushes* (etc.) the mind into a relation of understanding with a proposition. Linguistic items, be they sounds, sentence inscriptions or complex mental states, are at one level just physical happenings too. As a kind then, they clearly qualify to serve the same role crude prompts like severed heads and incredulous stares do. Prior to scepticism about meaning, it would have seemed absurd to think the difference between linguistic and non-linguistic prompts might be a matter of mere reliability (like a difference in degree, not in kind). It cannot be, if scepticism is true, but linguistic items don't *lose* that prompting power. Scepticism doesn't require us to withhold that power from sentences, only that we see that sentences, stares and severed heads are all in the same ball-park, expressively speaking.<sup>8</sup>

Clearly, both examples are open to dispute. Since it would not be very sensible to claim that severed heads and incredulous stares actually *represent* anything, and since the agents intuitively did come to understand the propositions I attribute to them, I expect my reader will deny that it was the heads and stares "what done it". They were present but they were part of a larger story in which something that really does represent the relevant propositions also figured, and it was this other thing that did the work. If there was representation going on in the background, then the examples cannot show that there can be understanding without representation. I will return to this below, when I discuss the bearing of the case on the notion of mental content, but even a concessive response by the sceptic need not undermine the case for scepticism about (non-mental) linguistic representation. This is because the *relata* I single out could still be the appropriate model for how (non-mental) linguistic objects could put someone in mind of a proposition, not by representation but by triggering (for want of a better word).<sup>9</sup> And of course, if the sceptic has an explanation of the phenomenon of being brought to understand the sceptical scenario through reading Kripke's book, then the phenomenon does not empirically refute scepticism.

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<sup>8</sup> Pål Antonsen put it to me that metaphors work in somewhat this way on certain accounts. For example, the sentence "A is a knight in shining armour" literally (apparently) says that A is a knight in shining armour, but metaphorically induces a mental state propositional attitude relation to the proposition that A has certain noble qualities.

<sup>9</sup> Here comparison might be made with the work of relevance theorists, like Sperber and Wilson (1995), who claim communication happens not primarily through a process of encoding and decoding messages but through providing one's audience with verbal evidence from which one's meaning can be inferred. A sceptic about linguistic (but not mental content) could be seen as an extreme kind of relevance theorist.

Certainly the triggering relation is under-described. The sceptic can afford to leave the notion more or less as a place-holder because it is not the material nature of ‘triggering’ here that is important but the different logical natures of triggering and representation. In point of logical nature, semantic relationships (representation, expression, reference etc.) are particularly demanding. They are susceptible to indeterminacy objections. A cannot represent B unless it does so exclusively. If “+” denotes *addition* then it doesn’t denote *quaddition* or *skaddition*.<sup>10</sup> Since these functions differ, at least one right answer in accordance with one of these functions is a wrong answer according to the others. So the sign cannot consistently serve them all. But while indeterminacy stops us saying A represents B, it doesn’t prevent there being *any* relationship between A and B. Indeed, if there is indeterminacy, there must be the weaker sort of connection. Triggering need be only one of the many possible weaker relations out there. It is useful to see the point in the following way: scepticism about the semantic relation motivated by indeterminacy arguments denies the *uniqueness* of any connection between word and object. It needn’t deny the *existence* of such a connection. It could admit a connection and still count as scepticism.

Grant the foregoing to the sceptic and they can say the following thing about the comprehensibility of Kripke’s sentences: The sentences don’t express any propositions, but *as it happened, in fact*, they triggered certain propositions in us (the reader may consult their intuition to know which ones – the sceptic certainly doesn’t want to say which propositions were triggered, or given the tenuousness of the non-semantic connection, to suggest that it *had* to be those propositions that were triggered. But such modal claims are not part of the data on which the intuitive challenge is based. The “Moorean fact” is only that the reader *did* understand something by these words, not that he or she *had* to understand this or that).

The logical space being exploited in the foregoing hypothesis is opened up by the fact that a semantic relationship imposes two necessary conditions. For A to represent B, A must be related to B *and* A must not be related in the same way to anything else. Semantic relations between words and their interpretations are *not* one-many in this sense. Understanding, however, allows that an agent may be related to more than one proposition. Understanding is one-many. From the agent’s perspective, the more propositions understood the better. Of course, understanding is subject to many other necessary conditions besides being a relationship holding between persons and propositions (for there are other propositional attitudes besides understanding). But the fact that understanding is

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<sup>10</sup> These functions are defined in Kripke’s book. Quaddition behaves like addition for numbers smaller than a certain finite limit, say 57, after which point the “quum” of two numbers is always 5. Skaddition behaves like addition when one neglects to carry over multiples of the next column into that column.

one-many means there is no counter-part to the indeterminacy objection for understanding. This gives room to say there might be understanding even where because of indeterminacy there is no expression.

Return your attention to the question of understanding and theories of mental content put to one side earlier. A proper understanding of the concept of understanding calls for *psychological* not merely logical work. The orthodox position is surely the view that understanding that *p* is a matter of *being in a mental state that represents that p*. If this is the case, then the previously mentioned purely logical differences notwithstanding, understanding is not possible in the absence of representation. As mentioned earlier, a sceptic about linguistic but not mental content could accept this position, but a Kripkean sceptic cannot. They cannot accept that understanding that *p* amounts to being in a state that represents that *p*, so they must to that extent break with the classical view of understanding. But rather than break from the conception of understanding as a propositional attitude altogether, the sceptic about mental content could say understanding *p* is a matter of being in a state *connected with p without representing it*, i.e. a state that triggers *p*. This is of course just to repeat the previous gambit at the level of mental content. Quite how a mental state gets to be connected to a proposition is mysterious (and the sceptic doesn't provide an account), but the sceptic rides on the coat tails of the critics. Realists about representation (and the representational element of the account of understanding) have to show two things, the existence and uniqueness of a connection to a proposition. Until someone produces an argument that these two properties always go hand in hand, the sceptic can simply co-opt the existence part of someone else's story. Denying uniqueness is enough to make one a sceptic.

The foregoing hypothesis is sufficient to show that the empirical phenomenon of understanding the thesis of semantic scepticism is consistent with semantic scepticism, and thus cannot count against it. It could be argued, though, that the non-representational sceptical connection is not the *best explanation* of our understanding the thesis of semantic scepticism. One's having a mental state that represents that *p* is a better explanation of one's standing in a propositional attitude relation to *p* than one's being in a mental state that is merely connected to *p*. This is a more sophisticated objection to scepticism, but it has none of the intuitive backing of the phenomenological testimony of first person experience. As I said above, it is not a "given" that the relation I currently stand in to certain propositions is a reliable one, only that there is some such relation. The claim that it is reliable must rest on other grounds. The claim that one understands because one has inner states that represent propositions could only be a better explanation *if it were true*. If it were true, there would be representation, so scepticism would be false. So the claim that representation better explains understanding than scepticism, presupposes that scepticism is false. It would be question-begging, in other words, to prefer representationalism to scepticism on that account.

### 3. Conclusion

If semantic scepticism is true, the sentences that compose this chapter do not mean anything. Much of the chapter attempts to diffuse the dizzying sense of absurdity attached to that thesis. I argued that scepticism is consistent with the assumptions underlying the challenge, because scepticism challenges only the *uniqueness* not the *existence* of a relation between sentences and propositions. This explains how, in the objector's own terms, we understand semantic scepticism.

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