

**Government of Ireland Post-Doctoral Fellowship Project
UCD, School of Philosophy**

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Title and short description

Meanings of Thumb: A semantic error theory

In a monograph length argument, I examine the dominant representational schema connecting meaning and truth: Sentence S is true-in-language-L if and only if p. Drawing on my PhD research, and recent developments, I argue it cannot bear the explanatory demands placed upon it.

State of the field (400 words allowed and used)

Since Davidson (1967), Lewis (1970), and Montague (1969) showed how successfully the techniques of formal logic could be adapted to the study of natural languages, the claim that the literal meaning of a sentence of a natural language, *what is said* by its utterance, is captured by a statement of its truth conditions has almost obtained the status of received opinion.

Recently however, it has been argued that literal meaning and what is said come apart. In particular, the view that truth-conditional literal meaning fixes what is said has been attacked by linguists and philosophers working on pragmatics (Sperber and Wilson, 1986; Carston, 2002; Recanati, 2004; Corazza, 2004). These theorists seek to explain the determination of what is said by appeal to the intentions of a speaker and features of the context. Their claims are contested (Borg, 2004; Cappellen & Lepore, 2005) and the debate is at the forefront of current semantics. Nonetheless, the contextualists' appeal to speaker intentions relies on contentious claims about the priority of language and thought. They can give no reassurance that speaker's intentions will fix what is said. Rather their data point to a deeper indeterminacy of literal meaning.

We miss the significance of these results if we don't connect them with earlier arguments. The reasons for rejecting truth-conditional semantics have been known for some time but their significance has not been appreciated. Tarski's early objections to the formal treatment of natural language (1956) have never been satisfactorily answered. Quine's arguments for the indeterminacy of meaning (1960), Kripke's (1982) treatment of rule-following and Putnam's "permutation" argument (1981) against model-theoretic semantics (revived by Gauker (2002)) all point to one conclusion: there's no fact of the matter about meaning.

There are a number of theoretical stances to take towards a discourse if the facts that would be needed for a realist descriptive explanation aren't forthcoming. Lance and O'Leary-Hawthorne (1997) appear to advocate a quasi-realist position: though semantic talk looks descriptive, it actually plays

a directing, prescriptive role and could always be eliminated without loss from any potential explanation of anything. But their account assumes the good standing of normative discourse. For someone who thinks the indeterminacy problem has deeper roots the only option may be an error theory: Accept the constative appearance of semantic talk. Accept that in the absence of facts its claims must be false, but try to explain the appearance of truth anyway.

Description of Project (500 words allowed and used)

The aim is to argue for an error theoretic approach to meaning. This involves undertaking two explanatory tasks. The first is to demonstrate the negative claim that there is no fact of the matter about meaning. The second is to provide a positive explanation of why it seems as if there is.

The major interpretive task of the first half will be to draw together a battery of arguments from such different sources as Tarski, Kripke, Quine, Putnam, the contextualists to form a meta-argument that there can be no facts about meaning. The arguments all exploit the central thesis of truth-conditional semantics: that natural languages accord with the Tarskian truth condition: 'Fa' is true-in-L if and only if what 'a' denotes has the property expressed by 'F' (usually expressed in propositional form as 's' is true-in-L if and only if p). The instances of this schema would record any semantic facts.

It will be argued: a) with Tarski, that the liar paradox shows that there can be no consistent model of a (whole) natural language, so the schema cannot give the correct interpretation of every sentence in a language; b) with Quine, Kripke, and Putnam, that the extensional equivalence of the biconditional is too weak for interpretation and there are arbitrarily many distinct but extensionally equivalent right-hand sides; c) with the contextualists, that what is said with an utterance eludes any biconditional specification; and d) that the biconditional account badly mishandles fictional discourse.

Based on my PhD research and subsequent work, I take the treatment of fictional discourse as a case study of the realist semantic schema. Consistently carrying it through, I argue, results in a Meinongian interpretation of the logical form of fictional statements. This entails that, except in exceptional circumstances, the content of fictional claims is strictly indeterminate because there are too many possible entities fictional statements could be about.

According to the positive conception of meaning being developed, although meaning is fundamentally indeterminate, it is not the case that anything goes. Word and sentence types have a practical significance that derives from their functional role in a set of linguistic practices. The functional roles elude fully determinate specification, but they can be coarsely and vaguely identified. I call these "quasi-meanings" or "meanings of thumb." The feeling that words and sentences have determinate meaning is attributed to the fact that object language indeterminacy is masked both by similar indeterminacies in metalinguistic characterisations and the intentional attitudes of speakers.

As a consequence of Quine's attack on the analytic-synthetic distinction, conceptual roles must be seen as holistic. In this sense the putative meaning of any word imposes constraints on the meanings of all the others. It can nevertheless be shown that global rational pressures operate to constrain the meanings speakers can take expressions to have and that these pressures exert a long-term tendency toward convergence in use. The account will be extended to explain some kinds of linguistic change and dialect formation (where this is semantic in nature).

Effect on field statement (400 allowed; 384 used)

In the project I interpret current controversies in semantics in light of historical challenges, which I trace right back to the start of modern thinking about logic and language. At the heart of the challenge is the t-schema and the assumption that it reports linguistic facts. My claims about the extent of linguistic indeterminacy, both its ubiquity and the diversity of sources, together with the claim that linguistic indeterminacy is incompatible with the existence of linguistic facts call for a reappraisal of the t-schema and the nature of indeterminacy. The call has wider consequences outside philosophical semantics. If there are no meaning facts, this increases the chances of a naturalisation of the mind by removing an explanatory burden from that project.

The positive conception of meaning in terms of pseudo-meanings or meanings of thumb demands a change of focus from the study of language *qua* abstract, set-theoretic entity to the study of the dynamic negotiation of meaning between speaker and hearer in communication, and the development of new formal tools, possibly taken from economic theory, to study the convergence of individual pseudo-meanings toward a general meaning equilibrium. One of the fruits of the cross-fertilization from economics may be new insights into concept formation and evolution. If meaning is the product of negotiation, then it makes sense to ask whether all parties to the negotiation are on a level footing. The suggestion that they are not allows us to recover the insights of semantic externalism within this framework, and provides a point of contact for feminist arguments about the bearing of power relations on conceptual content. This perspective on meaning throws new light on old distinctions. If there are strictly no facts of the matter about meaning, and no analytic/synthetic distinction, the traditional distinction between connotation and denotation should be seen as a difference in degree not kind. This places consequent importance on stylistics and pragmatics for the understanding of meaning and the conceptual role framework is particularly suited to discussing these aspects of pseudo-content like the special significance of loaded language (approbative and pejorative concepts).

In short philosophers following the semantic proposals herein, will shift their attention from the study of languages to the study of speech; from model-theoretic semantics to sociolinguistics and to the formal techniques of statistics, game-theory and general equilibrium theory.

Impact of fellowship (200 allowed; 124 used)

The IRCHSS post-doc scheme will furnish me with the necessary time, space, computing facilities, administrative and library support to carry out and complete the work outlined in the above proposal.

The Philosophy department of University College, Dublin is ideally placed to host my proposal, which complements the research interests of Dr O'Shea (Sellarsian philosophy of language), Dr Baghramian (Relativism, interpretation in the philosophy of language), Dr Stout, and Dr Mole (in the philosophy of mind).

My tenure at UCD would further strengthen and contribute to the on-going research projects in the department, such as the biannual international Philosophy of Language workshops – organized under the auspices of the Irish Network of Philosophers of Language and Thought - and the Normativity Research Project funded by UCD.

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