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THE SEMANTIC REALISM/ANTI-REALISM DISPUTE AND KNOWLEDGE OF MEANINGS¹

ABSTRACT: Here the relationship between understanding and knowledge of meaning is discussed from two different perspectives: that of Dummettian semantic anti-realism and that of the semantic externalism of Putnam and others. The question addressed is whether or not the truth of semantic externalism would undermine a central premise in one of Dummetts key arguments for anti-realism, insofar as Dummetts premise involves an assumption about the transparency of meaning and semantic externalism is often taken to undermine such transparency. Several notions of transparency and conveyability of meaning are distinguished and it is argued that, though the Dummettian argument for anti-realism presupposes only a weak connection between knowledge of meaning and understanding, even this much is not trivially true in light of semantic externalism, and that semantic externalism, if true, would thus represent a reason for rejecting the crucial assumption on which the Dummettian argument depends.

1. INTRODUCTION

The argument between semantic realism and anti-realism,² according to Dummett and all those who follow him in this terminology, is

whether or not the meaning (or a central component of the meaning) of a declarative, indexical-free sentence can be taken to be the conditions in which the sentence is true—where truth is understood as being at least potentially verification-transcendent (i.e. correspondence to reality). The semantic realist answers the question affirmatively, whereas the semantic anti-realist of the Dummettian type denies this.

Sometimes the anti-realists suggest that truth (taken as something essentially verification-transcendent) cannot serve as the central notion of the theory of meaning and must be replaced by verifiability; at times, it is rather suggested that truth itself must be understood in an epistemically constrained way, and be equated with verifiability.³ Either way, the question is whether the meaning of a sentence could consist of, or determine, truth-conditions which can obtain independently of a speaker's ability to recognizing that they obtain or fail to obtain.

The juxtaposition of realism and anti-realism, however, typically gets quickly reformulated, in the Dummettian literature, as the question of whether a competent speaker-hearer *can know* or grasp such verification-transcendent truth-conditions or not⁴—or, often (see e.g. Miller (2003)), the contrast is formulated in this way from the beginning. I shall call this “epistemological” way of putting the difference between realism and anti-realism, in terms of what a competent speaker-hearer *knows* or *can know*, “the second formulation”, and the above, more “metaphysical” way, which only talks about what kind of truth-conditions declarative sentences may or may not *have*, “the first formulation” of the realism/anti-realism-opposition. And it is when the matter is formulated in the second way that semantic realism may begin to look problematic, as it seems to postulate for language-users knowledge which they arguably cannot—according to Dummett and his disciples—have.

But harmless as the move from the first formulation to the second formulation may first look for many—it is often taken as a tautology that understanding amounts to knowledge of meaning—it is my aim in this brief note to argue that the two formulations are by no means equivalent, and that the move from the former to the latter is in fact far from harmless and changes dramatically the setting; the second formulation is highly misleading, for it presents us with a false dichotomy—or so I will try to argue. In the course of this argument, some more

general observations about knowledge of meaning also emerge.

2. DUMMETT'S MASTER ARGUMENT

Let us recall how the Dummettian argument undermining semantic realism goes.⁵ We can split the argument into three parts (cf. Shieh (1998b)):⁶

2.1. *The essential communicability of meaning argument*

To begin with, Dummett submits that the meaning of a statement cannot be, or contain as an ingredient, anything which is not manifest in the *use* made of it, lying solely in the mind of the individual who apprehends that meaning: if two individuals agree completely about the use to be made of the statement, then they agree about its meaning.

Now there has been some unclarity, in the secondary literature, about what more exactly counts as the same use (for example, it seems to be a common misunderstanding that it would be just the same dispositions to assent and dissent, à la Quine). Fortunately, Sanford Shieh (1998a) gives a careful analysis of the issue, and argues, convincingly in my view, that for Dummett the sameness of use amounts to the following: If two speakers agree in what they would *count* as justifications for a statement, then they attach the same meaning to it. In other words, it should not be possible that two subjects would agree in what they would count as justification for a statement but attach different meanings to it (we'll return to this point below).

In any case, Dummett then goes on to state that an individual cannot communicate what he cannot be observed to communicate: if one individual associated with an expression some mental content, where the association did not lie in the use he made of the expression, then he could not convey that content by means of the symbol or formula, for his audience would be unaware of the association and would have no means of becoming aware of it.

2.2. *Argument for the implicitness of linguistic knowledge*

Furthermore, Dummett argues that knowledge of meaning must be, in the end, implicit.

To be sure, Dummett grants that knowledge of the meaning of an expression is frequently verbalizable knowledge, that is, knowledge which consists in the ability to state the rules in accordance with which the expression is used. However, Dummett adds, to suppose that, in general, a knowledge of meaning consisted in verbalizable knowledge would involve an infinite regress: if a grasp of the meaning of an expression consisted, in general, in the ability to *state* its meaning, then it would be impossible for anyone to learn a language who was not already equipped with a fairly extensive language. Hence, Dummett concludes, that the knowledge which constitutes the understanding of language must be implicit knowledge.

Implicit knowledge cannot, so the argument continues, meaningfully be ascribed to someone unless it is possible to say in what the manifestation of that knowledge consists: there must be an observable difference between the behavior or capacities of someone who is said to have that knowledge and someone who is said to lack it; hence it follows that a grasp of the meaning of a statement must, in general, consist of a capacity to use that statement in a certain way.

2.3. *The argument against realist truth conditions*

Finally, Dummett submits, it is quite obscure in what the knowledge of the condition under which a sentence is true can consist, when that condition is not one which is always capable of being recognized as obtaining; when a sentence is not “effectively decidable”⁷, the condition which must, in general, obtain for it to be true is not one which we are capable of recognizing whenever it obtains, or of getting ourselves in a position to do so.

Hence any behavior which displays a capacity for acknowledging the sentence as being true in all cases in which the condition for its truth can be recognized as obtaining will fall short of being a full manifestation of the knowledge of the condition for its truth.

Sanford Shieh, in his valuable analysis of Dummett's argument, summarizes the challenge of semantic anti-realism thus: “the burden of proof is on realism, to produce a satisfactory account of the concept of knowing realist truth conditions” (Shieh 1998a, 659). Note, by the way, that this presupposes what we have called “the second formulation”.

The details of all these steps can be, and have been, debated.⁸ But let us, for the sake of the argument, grant (2) and (3), and focus on (1); the argument from the essential communicability of meaning; that, in any case, is what interests us here.

3. TRANSPARENCY, COMMUNICABILITY AND CONVEYABILITY OF MEANING

Both Dummett's master argument and the move from the first to the second formulation are essentially based on certain—no doubt widely held—ideas concerning the knowability of meaning. Indeed, Dummett has always pressed that meanings must be transparent for language-users. He asserts, for example: "It is an undeniable feature of the notion of meaning... that meaning is *transparent* in the sense that, if someone attaches a meaning to each of two words, he must know whether these meanings are the same." [Dummett (1978), p. 131.] However, it is not always clear how strongly such ideas are meant to be interpreted.

Following Alexander George (1997), it is useful to distinguish various different though related theses concerning meaning here.⁹ Namely, there are at least three different ideas, which one often tends to conflate, that are effective in such considerations; they are, from the strongest to the weakest:

Conveyability: One can always establish *which* meaning a speaker has associated with the expression of her language.

Equatability: If two people attach the *same* meaning to an expression, then it is possible for one to ascertain this.

Differentiability: If two speakers associate *different* meanings with an expression, then it is possible for one to determine this.

As was already suggested above, these are not clearly distinguished, in the writings of Dummett and others, and one tends to slide from one to another without noticing their differences. Nevertheless, these are distinct theses, and it is at least in principle possible to hold a weaker thesis without committing oneself to the stronger ones.

Now as George concludes, though, it is only the last, weaker one that is really required in the Dummettian argument in favour of anti-realism; actually, this harmonizes also well with Shieh's analysis above, according to which the crucial issue, in Dummett's argument, is that if two speakers associate different meanings with a statement, then there should be a difference in what they count as a justification for the statement; and that difference ought to be manifestable. Nevertheless, I shall argue below that even this weaker principle is—if not blatantly indefensible—at least deniable.

4. HOW ABOUT SEMANTIC EXTERNALISM?

Nowadays increasingly many philosophers find the externalist arguments of Putnam and others compelling. However, these arguments also entail that there is a definite sense in which we do *not* actually know the meanings of many of our words (though it seems to me that this is not always sufficiently well understood even by many of those who are in principle sympathetic to the externalist arguments). That is, although the idea that understanding just is knowledge of meaning has played an essential role in much of the contemporary philosophy of language, this picture (at least, if interpreted along the lines that Dummett and many others do) just cannot be correct, if the basic lesson of semantic externalism is true.¹⁰

Certainly the most famous and influential argument for semantic externalism is Putnam's Twin Earth thought experiment Putnam (1975a). Let us briefly remind ourselves about its main lines: Imagine thus that somewhere, far, far away, there is a planet very much like Earth; let us call it Twin Earth. There is intelligent life on the planet, and languages similar to ours are spoken there. There is, however, a peculiar difference between Earth and Twin Earth: the liquid called 'water' on Twin Earth is not H₂O but a totally different liquid whose chemical formula is very long and complicated; we may abbreviate it as XYZ. It is assumed that it is indistinguishable from water in normal circumstances; it tastes like water and quenches thirst like water, lakes and seas of Twin Earth contain XYZ, it rains XYZ there, etc. Next, imagine that we roll the time back to, say, 1750, when chemistry had not been developed on either Earth or Twin Earth. At that time nobody in

either linguistic community would have been able to differentiate between XYZ and H₂O. Unless there has been a massive meaning change in between (not a particularly attractive line to take¹¹), the extension of ‘water’ was just as much H₂O on Earth, and the extension of ‘water’ was just as much XYZ on Twin Earth.

However, one simply could not determine, on the basis of observable linguistic behaviour of the language-users in 1750, whether our “water” and their “water” had the same meaning or not. The manifestable use of the two linguistic communities would be exactly the same. So would any explicit verbalizable knowledge of meaning. Also, consider a pair of statements in these two languages which contain “water”, with all the other words really having the same meaning. Now a speaker on Earth and on Twin Earth (in 1750, being ignorant of any chemistry) would agree in what they would *count* as justifications for such a statement: in part, that the stuff in question is clear, tasteless and odorless liquid, quenches thirst, and whatever. Nevertheless, under the standard assumption that meaning determines extension¹²—that is, that if the extensions of two expressions differ, their meanings cannot be the same—it is the case that our “water” and “water” in Twin Earth differ in meaning.

This thought-experiment and its kin undermine the assumption of the transparency of meaning, and the whole equation of competence in a language with knowledge of its meanings (at least in the way that the Dummettians understand it). Hence, if the argument is sound, the step from the first formulation to the second formulation is also unjustified.¹³

Even if the above point may have been left somewhat implicit in, for example, Putnam’s seminal paper “Meaning of ‘meaning’” Putnam (1975a), Putnam has certainly made it explicit enough in some other writings:

But, then, some have objected, it seems that I am saying that we “didn’t know the meaning of the word ‘water’” until we developed modern chemistry.

This objection simply involves an equivocation on the phrase “know the meaning”. To know the meaning of a word may mean (a) to know how to translate it, or (b) to know what it refers to, in the sense of having the ability to state ex-

plicitly what the denotation is (other than by using the word itself), or (c) to have tacit knowledge of its meaning, in the sense of being able to use the word in discourse. The only sense in which the average speaker of the language “knows the meaning” of most of his words is (c). In that sense, it was true in 1750 that Earth English speakers knew the meaning of the word “water” and it was true in 1750 that Twin Earth English speakers knew the meaning of their word “water”. “Knowing the meaning” in this sense isn’t literally knowing some fact. (Putnam 1988, 32)

Actually, already in another paper from the time of “Meaning of ‘meaning’”, Putnam wrote:

... a speaker may ‘have’ a word, in the sense of possessing normal ability to use it in discourse, and not know the mechanism of reference of that word, explicitly or even implicitly. ‘Knowing the meaning’ of a word in the sense of being able to use it is implicitly knowing something; but it isn’t knowing nearly as much as philosophers tend to assume. I can know the meaning of the word ‘gold’ without knowing, explicitly or implicitly, the criteria for being gold (contrary to John Locke), and without having any very clear idea at all just how the word is tied to what ever it is tied to. (Putnam 1975b, 278)

Another important figure in the externalist camp, Michael Devitt, in turn puts the point thus:

It is natural (and correct) to think that, for the most part, we ‘know what we mean’ by the words we use. However, this expression should not mislead us to exaggerating, as description theories do, the degree to which we are experts on the semantics of our language, and in particular the degree to which we are experts on what our terms refer to; there is a sense in which we do not, for the most part, know what we mean. (Devitt 1981, 20)

So, what more exactly is required for being a competent speaker according to externalists? In what sense does she “know the meanings”

of her language? Unfortunately, the leading externalists do not say much of anything positive about this; moreover, they give somewhat conflicting answers.

To begin with, surely a person must have, in order to be competent with a word, say, “water”, caught on to the syntactical role of the word; the person must be able to combine “water” appropriately with other words to form sentences. (Devitt (1981), p. 196; cf. Devitt (1983)). Furthermore, to understand the English word “water”, to have the ability to successfully refer with it to water, is to be appropriately linked to the network of causal chains for “water”, involving other people’s abilities as well as groundings and reference borrowings. The usage of our speaker must be grounded in water (that is, H₂O). A Twin-Earthian, who in other respects has the same ability with “water” that we do, simply does not have our understanding of the word because his ability is grounded not in water but in apparently similar but really quite different stuff. There is no way she could be competent with our word “water” (see Devitt 1981, 1983).

How much more is required for competence? Here the opinions begin to differ. Putnam famously introduced his idea of “stereotypes”. These are sets of descriptions commonly associated with a word; for example, the one associated with “water” might be along the lines “clear, tasteless and odorless liquid which quenches thirst”, or something. Of course Putnam, as an externalist, does not claim that the connection between a word and such its stereotype is analytic, or that the stereotype correctly fixes the extension of the word. Nevertheless, Putnam proposes that the stereotype is part of the meaning of the word, and—what is essential here—that a person who does not know even the relevant stereotype does not know the meaning of the word, and consequently, would not succeed in referring with the word (Putnam 1975a).

Devitt, on the other hand, begs to differ; and I am inclined to agree here. Consider, for example, “echidna”. Devitt admits that he used to know next to nothing about echidnas; that is, he did not know even the stereotype for “echidna”—whatever that might be. Yet, given his place in the causal network for “echidna”, there seems to be no reason to deny that he could make true or false statements about echidnas, ask questions about them, give orders about them, and so forth, all

the time using “echidna”; that is, he could still successfully refer to echidnas. (Devitt 1981, 196).

Now it is certainly possible to continue to use the talk of “knowledge of meanings” while accepting the moral of the externalist arguments—as some philosophers have indeed done. Obviously this is more a matter of words. What is important is to keep in mind just how different this understanding of “the knowledge of meaning” is from the more traditional (and that of Dummett, in particular) way of cashing out this phrase. According to the latter picture, a competent speaker, to be able to successfully refer with a word, must know the meaning in the sense of either knowing the necessary and sufficient conditions for belonging to the extension of the word,¹⁴ or being able to recognize reliably whether something really is in the extension of the word or not. And it is this picture that is at issue now, and the one that externalism rebuts. In the move from the first to the second formulation, and in the second formulation and the Dummettian master argument in particular, “knowledge of meanings” is understood by Dummett and other in this specific, rather literal way. And that is what has been our target here.

5. CONCLUSIONS

From the externalist perspective, the whole second way of framing the difference between semantic realism and anti-realism is based on a false dichotomy: it is perfectly coherent to hold both that the truth-conditions of a sentence may be verification-transcendent and that speakers may not know them (in the sense relevant here). For this reason, realism in the first formulation and realism in the second formulation are by no means the same view: it is possible to advocate realism in the first sense, and simultaneously deny realism in the second sense.

Note, however, that my main point here is not to argue for the correctness of externalism, but simply to point out that the quite standard move from the first formulation to the second formulation of the juxtaposition of realism and anti-realism suggests a highly distorted picture of the field, and ignores—more or less by definition—one influential option from among the theories of meaning. Perhaps, at the end of the

day, externalism can not be defended (though I, for one, am quite confident about its defensibility). But still, this is something that requires some substantial philosophical argumentation, and cannot be ruled out by convention.

Notes

¹I am grateful to Barry Smith and Guy Longworth for their comments on the talk in Riga, and to Douglas Patterson for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

²There has been some dispute about the relationship of the semantic realism-antirealism issue to the more traditional metaphysical question of realism; see e.g. Devitt (1983), George (1984), Miller (2003), Putnam (2007), Devitt (2010). I think this unclarity goes back to Dummett himself: sometimes Dummett suggests that the metaphysical views of realism and idealism are only two unclear metaphors (see e.g. the introduction to Dummett (1978)) which cannot be rationally argued for or against, but must be replaced with the Dummettian semantic setting (see also Devitt (1983)). In other places, however, Dummett seems to apply this “metaphor thesis” more specifically to mathematical objects, and leave open the possibility that the metaphysical question might be perfectly meaningful in the case of, for example, external physical objects. And in still other occasions, Dummett rather seems to admit that the metaphysical realism question (even in the case of mathematical objects) and the semantic realism/anti-realism question are simply two independent and equally meaningful questions (see e.g. Dummett (1992)).

³For a detailed critical discussion of such epistemological theories of truth, in the context of the philosophy of mathematics (that is, the intuitionistic views of truth), and Dummett’s attempts of explication in particular there, see Raatikainen (2005).

⁴See e.g. the very first paragraph of Dummett (1969).

⁵Perhaps the most detailed presentation of the argument is in Dummett (1975); see also Dummett (1969). The argument appears in a number of articles collected in Dummett (1978) and Dummett (1993); see also Shieh (1998a).

⁶My understanding of Dummett’s argument has been greatly aided by Shieh (1998a).

⁷What, more exactly, “undecidable” could mean in Dummett is in fact quite elusive; see Shieh (1998b). Very roughly, a statement is undecidable if we don’t know whether we can verify it, and we also don’t know whether we can falsify it.

⁸See e.g. Devitt (1983); Miller (2003).

⁹A larger part of George’s paper is devoted to the exegetical question whether Frege really subscribed any or all these theses. The perceptive distinctions George presents are, though, very interesting in themselves, quite independently of this question.

¹⁰I am, of course, not at all the first one to suggest this kind of line. Perhaps the first to use explicitly externalist views against the Dummettian arguments was Millar (1977); see also McGinn (1982), Currie & Eggenberger (1983), Devitt (1983), Gamble (2003). Actually Dummett himself seems to have, early on (see e.g. Dummett (1974)), admitted that if the externalist view on meaning is correct, his own view must be wrong. Both Wright (1986) and Green (2001), in contrast, suggest that the externalist conclusions

and the Dummettian anti-realist approach can be both accepted coherently; I must say I don’t have the faintest idea how this could be done, and they don’t give even a slightest hint.

¹¹For if one begins to assume that there is a change in the meaning of a term whenever the beliefs associated with the term change, one is dangerously sliding towards radical meaning variance, incommensurability and conceptual relativism à la Kuhn and Feyerabend. And anyone with even a modest faith in the rationality of science should not start going that way. (In fact, Dummett, at least in one passage Dummett (1974), suggests exactly this strategy as a response to the externalist arguments. We can only guess that he had not really thought the idea through carefully.)

¹²There are now some (see e.g. Crane (2001); Farkas (2006), 2008) who suggest that, instead of accepting externalism, we should give up this assumption. I personally have serious doubts about this strategy, but here it is sufficient to note that in any case, this line is not open for Dummett and his followers; they are deeply committed to this traditional Fregean assumption.

¹³In fact, I would further argue that such considerations also undermine the key premise (“linguistic behaviorism”) of both Quine’s indeterminacy of translation thesis and Davidson’s whole semantic program, but going there in detail would be too much a digression. For more about Quine’s case, see my (Raatikainen, 2005). For Davidson, suffice it to say that he totally agrees with Quine about the fundamental premise here.

¹⁴Or, perhaps, in the spirit of the later cluster description theory (Searle, Strawson etc.), some appropriate cluster of descriptions such that an object belongs to the extension of the word if and only if it satisfies most of these descriptions. Such a modification, though results a more plausible view, would not help here.

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