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Editor's Introduction

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

It can seem a truism that to understand a language is to know what its expressions mean. Although the idea that competent use of a language might consist in a practical ability or “know-how”, rather than in propositional “knowledge-that”, has a significant pedigree in 20th-century philosophy, in recent years the easy identification of understanding a language with knowledge that its expressions have certain meanings has been called into question in a number of significant ways. This volume collects contributions from participants in a conference on the topic held at the Center for Cognitive Sciences and Semantics and the University of Riga in August 2009.

Expanded interest in the topic has recently been spurred to a significant extent by Dean Pettit's “Why Knowledge is Unnecessary for Understanding Language” (*Mind*, 2002) and a subsequent exchange in the same journal in 2005 with Gross. (Henceforth in this introduction I refer the reader to the lists of References in the articles in this collection for relevant bibliographical information.) Pettit considers and draws conclusions from the following sorts of cases.

(1) By some coincidence, you come to have a belief or the disposition to form a belief about the meaning of some or all expressions in a language you previously did not understand—e.g., a lightning strike suddenly leaves you with a true belief that in German “Krankenschwester” means nurse. As a result, you have true beliefs about the meaning of German sentences involving it: you believe that sentences

uttered by speakers of German that involve it have truth-conditions that involve nurses, you believe that speakers who use it are expressing thoughts about nurses and so on. (I restrict myself to extensional contexts in this exposition.) These examples are Gettier cases in that the imagined subjects lack justification for their true beliefs about meaning and these beliefs are formed by unreliable processes.

(2) You are hoaxed into believing falsely that you have undergone some sort of change (e.g. the sort of kidnapping/brain-surgery/amnesia scenario familiar from epistemology) with the result that speech in a language that you don't understand seems to you as though it is meaningful speech in a language you do understand—e.g., that surgery followed by amnesia has left you in a state such that people speaking German will seem to you be speaking English, though what they seem to say in English has nothing to do with what they actually say in German. With this hoax in place, you are then exposed to normal English speakers but given misleading evidence that they are German speakers (adjust the details to fit to account for the otherwise looming problem involving a “dubbed movie effect” that a subject in this scenario might be expected to experience; Pettit suggests in one place that you hear the English speakers over the radio).

In case (1) you have true belief but not knowledge about meaning and in case (2) you lack even belief about meaning. Yet, Pettit argues, in both cases you understand the language in question. In case (1) if someone says to you, in German, “Die Krankenschwester kommt” you will believe that the nurse is coming, and in case (2) it will seem to you that a speaker has said that it is raining when you hear “It's raining”, even though you will not, as a result of the hoax, believe that this is what the speaker has said; surely, Pettit suggests, the hoax has not destroyed your ability to understand English but has merely caused you not to believe that things are as they seem. If Pettit is right understanding a language is not knowledge since neither justification nor reliability nor belief are required for it.

Furthermore, in a series of papers I have argued that the cognitive states in which understanding consists need not be true on the grounds that what the semantic paradoxes show is simply that, when it comes to competent speakers of natural languages, these cognitive states are jointly inconsistent. Since ordinary speakers think that they speak lan-

guages that have features that, by Tarski's theorem, no language can have (briefly, the capacity for self-reference or self-description, self-applying semantic vocabulary, and minimal inferential power), understanding a language not only need not involve justified or reliable belief or even belief of any sort, but also it need not consist in an attitude toward anything that is true at all.

So extant arguments in the literature suggest that not only is understanding or semantic competence not justified/reliable true belief, but that it could not be justified/reliable, could not be true, and could not be belief. One question, then, is what it is. In this volume Pettit, following up on his own earlier suggestions, as well as suggestions by others, explores the proposal that linguistic understanding is a kind of perceptual capacity. This proposal raises a series of questions. Is the difference between encountering and producing speech in one's native language of philosophical significance? What are we to make of the fact that one's take on syntax and semantics is, by familiar considerations most famously associated with Chomsky, underdetermined by one's evidence? Does this matter to the justification of the beliefs one forms by receiving testimony from others and, if so, how? Pettit's contribution addresses these and other issues. Green, by contrast, criticizes Pettit's conception of understanding, arguing that the considerations mentioned above show that understanding is not a kind of knowledge only on an impoverished, dispositional conception of understanding.

Hofweber, in turn, responds to my suggestion about what the paradoxes show by criticizing both my own suggestion, and a very different view developed by Jody Azzouni, as being far more radical than necessary to address the paradoxes. He suggests, instead, that the paradoxes are to be addressed by a conception of deductive inference on which a valid form of inference can have instances that are not truth-preserving; the model here is the semantics of generic statements. Just as "Tigers have stripes" is, putatively, true on one reading it commonly receives, despite the existence of tigers that are albino, bleached, painted and so on, so various inferences in classical logic are valid despite the existence of non-truth-preserving instances.

A related reason for thinking that understanding isn't belief is that contemporary psycholinguistics is committed, at least in many quarters, to the idea that large aspects of a native speaker's competence

with language are cognitively sub-doxastic or even modular in Fodor's sense. Gross's contribution explores one issue that this conception gives rise to in detail: both syntactically and semantically, the representations of language attributed to the speaker's sub-doxastic states by extant theories seem not to match the beliefs that subjects have about these sentences in using them to communicate. To take a simple sort of example, an ordinary speaker will take "Everyone eats" to be true if and only if everyone eats, yet standard representations of the semantics of this sentence in terms of generalized quantifier theory will give the sentence a truth-condition involving sets and operations upon them—even though ordinary speakers may well lack the set theoretic concepts required to grasp such truth-conditions. So what is the relationship between semantics as it is represented sub-personally, and the personal level beliefs that are required for ordinary, rational language use and understanding? Gross canvasses the issues and offers a number of criticisms and suggestions.

Ludlow considers the sense in which contemporary linguistics makes it uncomfortable to think of the competent speaker's relation to syntactic rules governing her language as one of knowing that they govern the language and, in light of this, asks in what sense such speakers follow such rules or are normatively guided by them. After a careful description of the elements that go into a completed statement of a description of a speaker, a theory stating the grammar of her language and the evidence for such a theory, Ludlow surveys a number of senses in which a speaker's linguistic behavior could be said to be guided by grammatical rules and settles upon one that he favors. A view modeled on contemporary meta-ethical work on what it means to be guided by a norm.

Azzouni's contribution also concerns the sense in which understanding involves a relation to rules or norms. In particular, Azzouni is concerned with the question, famously associated with Wittgenstein, especially on Kripke's influential reading, of whether one can follow a rule, and hence follow a rule for the application of a term, "privately", that is, without correction by others. Azzouni argues, through consideration of a series of examples of individuals with ever more articulate sets of dispositions to apply their terms and to evaluate the success of their activities based on these applications, that this is in fact possi-

ble and hence that there can, in the relevant sense, be private rule-following and, to that extent, private language.

Longworth offers an extended discussion of exactly how we might conceive of understanding an utterance if not as knowing that it means that such-and-such. One might, for instance, think of understanding the assertion that it is raining, not as knowledge that it says that it is raining, but as some relation to the proposition that it is raining, or some relation to the utterance itself, or as some capacity to infer back and forth between a description of the utterance and its content. After discussing the strengths and weaknesses of each conception, Longworth enters the suggestion that understanding an utterance might better be conceived of as a relation to an event than as a state that follows upon a certain kind of event; in making this suggestion he makes use of a distinction between ability-, achievement- and state-understanding developed by him in earlier work.

Bochner's contribution also concerns the question as to whether linguistic competence with a sentence that means that such-and-such requires knowing that it means that such-and-such. Bochner argues that it does not, taking familiar issues from the semantics of proper names as the focus of his attention. On Bochner's view, though the semantics of names themselves is directly referential—that is, the meaning of a name is just its bearer—it is sufficient for competence with a name that one have descriptive knowledge of what is in fact its referent. As a result, Bochner suggests, to understand a sentence *s* that means that *a* is *F* it is not necessary to know that *s* means that *a* is *F*; it is, rather, sufficient merely to know that it means that the *G* is *F*, where, in fact *a* is the *G*. The result is a refinement of the account of the understanding of names that, on Bochner's view, solves standard problems in the semantics and the epistemology of understanding proper names while retaining the view that understanding a sentence consists in knowledge that it has a certain meaning.

Several further contributions focus in one way or another on our representation of what it is that is grasped in understanding. Besson considers accounts of understanding the logical constants that represent what is grasped as collections of rules of inference. After considering problems with views on which understanding the meanings of the logical constants consists in dispositions to infer according to their

introduction and elimination rules, Besson suggests that the best view is that understanding a logical constant is knowing these rules, rather than having some disposition or construct out of dispositions to infer according to them. The problems with dispositionalism, on Besson's view, outweigh the putative disadvantages of the straightforward view that to understand a logical constant is to know that it is governed by its introduction and elimination rules.

Raatikainen's contribution concerns the question as to whether understanding a language is to be conceived of as a relation to the truth conditions of its sentences. Dummett famously argues that it cannot precisely on the grounds that understanding has to be knowledge of meaning, that knowledge of meaning must in turn be something manifested in the use made of sentences, and that, finally, a grasp on truth-conditions cannot in general be so manifested (e.g., when it comes to undecidable statements in mathematics). Raatikainen argues that many formulations of this argument rest on a conflation of two questions: the question of whether meaning consists in truth conditions, on the one hand, and the question of whether knowledge sufficient for understanding an expression has to be knowledge of the expression's truth conditions. Based on familiar externalist considerations hailing from Putnam, Raatikainen argues that it is coherent and attractive to hold that competent speakers need not know meaning and that meaning may, concomitantly, outstrip the epistemic capacities of speakers. Hence it may well be that meaning is truth-conditional but that competent speakers fail to know truth-conditions on broadly Dummettian grounds. The result is that a truth-conditional account of meaning may be compatible with the considerations about speakers' epistemic powers that are commonly taken to motivate the Dummettian rejection of such accounts of meaning.

On some conceptions of understanding it is maintained that there are claims involving an expression that are such that a speaker's failure to assent to them is sufficient for the speaker to understand the expression. "Analyticity" is one familiar term for this phenomenon, but Williamson has recently mounted a general argument against the existence of any such "understanding-assent links". Wikforss responds to Williamson's arguments maintaining that though we may need to reject the idea that for any given expression and any particular sentence,

there is an understanding-assent link between that expression and that sentence, nevertheless there are understanding-assent links that hold holistically between expressions and certain sets of sentences. The examples that Williamson uses to support his position thus, according to Wikforss, do not show that understanding is not constitutively tied to assent to sentences, but only that this sort of link should not be conceived of atomistically.

Rattan's contribution concerns the related issue of our grasp of the concepts expressed by our words. In particular, Rattan explores the extent to which subjects can incompletely grasp concepts while still being bound by intellectual norms arising from their grasp on these concepts. Rattan argues that such intellectual norms have individuative significance, that is, they help to determine what concepts one grasps and hence help to determine what thoughts one expresses by one's words.

It is my hope that this collection of essays will inspire further research on this important and interrelated set of problems and questions. The combined participation of the authors at the conference itself made for an intellectually rewarding gathering of the highest caliber, and it is my hope that together the written contributions make for a collection of similar value. I thank all of the contributors and participants for being a part of this project. I also thank my co-organizers James Woodbridge and Bradley Armour-Garb for their work on putting the conference and this volume together. Finally, I thank the staff of the Center for Cognitive Sciences and Semantics, the University of Riga (and especially its rector prof. Mārcis Auziņš), the Baltic Yearbook and its publisher New Prairie Press, and the Latvian Ministry of Culture—these thanks including, but not limited to, Dale Askey, Sandra Lapointe, and Jurgis Šķilters, as well as a team of local organizers and helpers, Kristīne Ante, Māris Skujevskis, Dana Vilistere, Elīna Visocka, Ruta Zālīte to mention just a few—and our editorial assistant Andrew Spear and layout editor Signe Cāne most warmly. Without their dedication to inquiry and to the support of philosophy and the cognitive sciences in Latvia none of this would have been possible.