

Meanings Done Right: An Act-Based Theory of Linguistic Meaning

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Introduction

- **The View:** The right approach to understanding *what is said*, in using some bit of language, is to think of it in terms of *what is done*, in using that bit of language, understanding these “linguistic doings” in normative terms: as “moves” that can be made in the social practice of speaking a language.
- **The Plan for the Talk:**
 1. Motivate this approach in conversation with some contemporary work on the metaphysics of linguistic meaning, as well as some key figures in the history of analytic philosophy such as Frege, Wittgenstein, and Wilfrid Sellars.
 2. Consider some of its broader philosophical implications for the task of understanding language in general.

1 The Traditional Picture

- **A Fact:** Two people can say the same thing, and they can do so speaking two different languages.
 - **Example:**
 - * **Norm, in English:** “The Sun is round.”
 - * **Maddy, in Spanish:** “El Sol es redondo.”Both Norm and Maddy said the same thing, namely, *that the Sun is round*.
But there isn’t one sentence that they’ve both uttered.
- **Question:** What are these “things that are said,” picked out with clauses such as “that the Sun is round,” if not sentences?
- **Stipulation:** They are *propositions*.
- **Propositions:** Things that are said or asserted: *sayables* or *assertibles*.
- **Three Norms of Assertion:** Drawing from Huw Price (2003):
 - **Belief-Norm:** Only assert what you believe.
 - **Reason-Norm:** Only assert what there are reasons for.

- **Truth-Norm:** Only assert what is true.
- So, thinking of propositions as assertibles, we can further articulate them as:
 - Things that *can be believed or disbelieved*.
 - Things that *can stand in reason relations* to one another.
 - Things that *can be true or false*.
- The basic picture:
 - Propositions are the objects of assertion and belief: the things asserted or believed.
 - Sentences “express” propositions.
 - * Two sentences of two different languages might express the same proposition.
 - Assertions and beliefs are true or false in virtue of the fact that the propositions asserted or believed are true or false.
 - Sentences are true or false in virtue of expressing propositions that are true or false.
- Propositions aren’t simply true or false; they have *truth-conditions*. They, as it were, “carve out” a range of ways for things to be such that, things being any of those ways, the proposition is true.
- **Two Inter-Related Questions:**
 - **Metaphysical:** What, exactly, are propositions?
 - **Epistemological:** How do we have knowledge of them?
- **Gottlob Frege:** “If every thought requires an owner and belongs to the contents of his consciousness, then the thought has this owner alone; and there is no science common to many on which many could work, put perhaps I have my science, a totality of thoughts whose owner I am, and another person has his. Each of us is concerned with the contents of his own consciousness,” (1918, 336).
- **The Traditional Fregean Metaphysics:** Propositions are abstract entities, independent of our mental and linguistic activities, which have truth-conditions essentially.
 - Truth-conditions settle reason relations.
 - We stand in a certain cognitive relation to propositions (“grasping them”), through which know their truth-conditions.
 - * This puts us in a position to believe them.
 - * We can then express these believes in assertions.
- **The Basic Question:** What is the cognitive relation we bear to propositions such that we have knowledge of them?
 - Frege is clear that the relation can’t be perceptual:

“A thought is something imperceptible: anything the senses can perceive is excluded from the realm of things for which the question of truth arises [. . .] That the Sun has risen is not an object emitting rays that reach my eyes; it is not a visible thing like the Sun itself,” (1918, 328).

So what is it?

- * Recent philosophers of mind and language, such as Jeff King, Scott Soames, and Peter Hanks, have been very troubled by this question, and the traditional conception more generally.
- * In response, they've put forward "naturalized" accounts of propositions, which attempt to explain propositions as in some way dependent on our cognitive or linguistic activities.

2 The Act-Based View

- **A Basic Feature of the Standard View:** What it is for two people to "say the same thing" is for there to be some *thing*, the proposition, to which the both stand in the saying relation.
 - We have a basic distinction between the *act*—the *saying*—and the *object*—what is *said*.
- **Wilfrid Sellars Against the Standard View:** When we say, for instance, "Jones says that *p*," the expression "that *p*" functions "as a special kind of adverb" (1969, 227). That is, it "functions as an adverbial modifier of the verb 'says,'" (1979, 72).
 - **The Sellarsian Thought, applied:** When we say, "Norm and Maddy said the same thing, namely *that the Sun is round*," the expression "that the Sun is Round" is really not functioning to *pick out* some thing to which they both stand in the saying relation, but, rather to *characterize* their sayings, intrinsically as sayings, classifying them as sayings of the same type.
- **The Act-Based View:** Identify propositions with types of linguistic acts.
 - When we say that two people "say the same thing." The surface grammar is a bit misleading. What we're really expressing is that they both performed the same type of act.
 - The distinction between act *token* and act *type* does the work traditionally done by the distinction between *act* and *object*.
- **The Contemporary Construal of the The Act-Based View:** The act-types with which propositions are to be identified are acts of *predication* (Hanks, Soames)
 - In the simple case of propositions such as that the Sun is round, these are complex acts of referring to some object, expressing some property, and predicating the property expressed of the object referred to.
 - * Thus, when Norm says "The Sun is round" and Maddy says "El Sol es redondo," they both perform the act of referring to the Sun, expressing the property of being round, and predicating this property of the object to which they've referred, thus saying of the Sun that it's round.
- **Soames:** "The cognitive conception of propositions avoids the obscure Platonic epistemology of traditional conceptions and demystifies our acquaintance with, and knowledge of, propositions by taking both to be grounded in concrete cognitive experience," (2015, 20).

- Our grasp of propositions is nothing other than our grasp of the representational acts we are capable of performing.
- Thus, rather than our knowledge of propositions being understood on the model of *perception*, it is understood as a certain kind of *self-knowledge*: knowledge of our own acts and capacities, acquired not by *perceiving*, but by *self-consciously doing*.

3 The Problem with Properties

- **The Traditional Platonistic Metaphysics:** Properties are abstract entities, independent of our cognitive and linguistic activities, which have instantiation-conditions intrinsically.
- Instantiation-conditions settle reason relations.
 - We stand in a certain cognitive relation to properties (“grasping them”), through which know their instantiation-conditions.
 - * This puts us in a position to ascribe them to things.
 - * We can then express these ascriptions in language.
- **The Basic Question:** What is the cognitive relation in which we stand to properties such that, standing in this relation, we grasp their instantiation-conditions?

Has the act-based theorist really overcome the basic issue?

- **Hanks:** “[T]his Platonistic conception of properties and property expression brings my account of representation uncomfortably close to the Fregean picture, and it raises its own metaphysical and epistemological problems,” (2015, 206-207).
 - Indeed, the core metaphysical/epistemological problem *is the same problem*.

4 The Heart of the Problem

- **Psychological Platonism:** The idea “that the phenomena of *meaning* involves some sort of commerce (usually spoken of in terms of ‘intuition,’ ‘apprehension’ or ‘awareness’) between persons and abstract entities,” (Sellars 1963, 442).
 - Standard act-based theorists, such as Hanks and Soames, try to avoid psychological Platonism with respect to propositions, but they are still committed to psychological Platonism with respect to properties.
- **Wittgenstein and Sellars:** Psychological Platonism is radically mistaken. Abstract objects such as properties simply aren’t able to do the work that they’re recruited to do in the context of a theory of linguistic meaning.
- **The Work Properties Must Do:** Insofar as properties are identified as what one must grasp to know the meaning of a predicate, to grasp a property is to grasp a general rule for correctly using that predicate across a range of different cases.
- **Question:** How does one grasp such a rule?

- **Wittgenstein:** “When someone says the word “cube” to me, for example, I know what it means. But can the whole *use* of the word come before my mind when I *understand* it in this way? [. . .] What really comes before our mind when we understand a word? Isn’t it something like a picture?” (1953, §139).
 - In order for the picture to play the role it must play, it must be *interpreted in the right way*, and an interpretation presupposes the very understanding for which it is supposed to account.
 - Thus, we’re left positing items that, unlike pictures, don’t require an interpretation, somehow *imposing* upon a subject the correct understanding.
- **The Myth of the Given (one formulation):** The thought that there’s some sort of cognitive contact we could have with something that simply that confers upon us general conceptual understanding (Sellars 1956).
- **The Dilemma:** Either we give no story at all of what this sort of “cognitive contact” could be, thus ending up with a view that’s *unintelligible*, or we give a story that presupposes the general conceptual understanding for which this sort of “cognitive contact” is supposed to account, thus ending up with a view that’s *incoherent*.
 - **John McDowell:** “Givenness in the sense of the Myth would be an availability for cognition to subjects whose getting what is supposedly Given to them does not draw on capacities required for the sort of cognition in question,” (2009, 256).

5 A Radicalized Act-Based Account

- **Assertibles, Saturated and Unsaturated:** Not only can two people say the same thing, but two people can say the same thing *of* something, or of different things.

Example: Norm can say of the Sun that it’s round and Maddy can say of Neptune that it’s round.

- **The Standard View, Once Again:** When we say, for instance, “Norm said of the Sun what Maddy said of Neptune, namely, *that it’s round*,” the expression “that it’s round” picks out some object—the property of being round—to which Maddy and Norm stand in the saying-of (predicating) relation.
- **The Sellarsian Thought, Once Again:** When we say “Norm said of the Sun what Maddy said of Neptune, namely, *that it’s round*,” the expression “that it’s round” does not function to *pick out* some *object* to which Norm and Maddy both stand in the *saying-of* relation, but functions to *characterize* their saying-ofs, intrinsically as *acts*.
- **The Task:** Characterize the act of saying of something that it’s round *intrinsically*, without an appeal to extrinsic contents.
- **Two Parts:** Before turning back to the generic act of saying of something that it’s round, let us consider the act of saying that the Sun is round. This act is an assertion. We can break down our task into two parts:

1. Characterize what an assertion in general is, without any appeal to extrinsic contents asserted.
 2. Characterize what the particular assertion that the Sun is round is, without any appeal to extrinsic contents asserted.
- **J.L. Austin** “[I]f I have stated something, then that commits me to other statements: other statements made by me will be in order or out of order. Also some statements or remarks made by you will be henceforward contradicting me or not contradicting me, rebutting me or not rebutting me, and so forth,” (1962, 139).
 - **Brandom on Asserting:** An assertion is a basic “move” one can make in “the game of giving and asking for reasons.” One can understand what it is to make an assertion by thinking about the role that making such a move plays in the game (1983, 1994).
 - **Two Basic Normative Statures:** The two basic normative statures that Brandom uses to articulate the norms determining how the game goes are *entitlement* and *commitment*.
 - * **Entitlement:** A kind of move-making license; a status that’s acknowledge by the players as *enabling* a player to make a move.
 - * **Commitment:** A status that one takes on when one makes a move whereby one is *compelled* to defend that move in response to appropriate challenges.
 - **Challenges:** Assertions that function as counter-moves.
 - **Consequential Attributions of Statures:** Making some moves *commits* one to some other moves, and *precludes one from being entitled* to others.
 - * Asserting that the Sun is spherical commits one to asserting that the Sun is round.
 - * Asserting that the Sun is round precludes one from being entitled to to assert that the Sun is square.
 - * And so on . . .

Particular assertions are identified as the types of acts that they are in virtue of their distinctive normative roles, understood in terms of such consequential attributions.
 - **The Key Thought Here:** Normative functionalism.
 - **Functionalism:** Understand what it is for something to be the type of thing that it is in terms of the functional role it plays in a broader system.
 - **Not Causal, but Normative:** Understand an assertion’s “functional role” in terms of the *norms* governing its correct performance.
 - **A Formal Framework:** This can be formally spelled out as a kind of *dynamic semantics* which enables one to assign mathematically precise meanings to sentences in terms of their discursive roles.
 - **Abstracting the Roles of Predicates:** Once we have a normative functionalist account of propositional acts, the acts one performs in uttering sentences, it is straightforward to extend this account to the acts one performs in uttering predicates, abstracting away from the specific referential act one performs. Thus,
 - Asserting of something that it’s spherical commits one to asserting of it that it’s round.
 - Asserting of something that it’s round precludes one from being entitled to assert of it that it’s square.
 - And so on . . .

6 Psychological Nominalism

- **Wittgenstein:**

- “There is a way of grasping a rule which is not an interpretation, but which is exhibited in what we call “following the rule” and “going against it” in actual cases,” (1953, §201).
- “When I follow the rule, I do not choose. I follow the rule *blindly*,” (1953, §219)

- **The Basic Picture:**

- One is *following* the rules and *being held* to the rules in ones performances, before one has any explicit *conception* of the rules.
- Eventually, through this process, one begins *holding others* to the rules which one is being held.
- Finally, one *holds oneself* to the rules. An explicit grasp of the rules is ultimately a product of holding oneself to the rules to which one is held.

- **Wittgenstein:** “Light dawns gradually over the whole,” (1969, §144).

- **The Twist:** The way in which these rules show up to one is not, in the first instance, as norms of *asserting*, but as contents *asserted*.

- **Articulating properties:** We can understand that it is for something to be some way—what it is for something to have some property—in terms of what something’s being that way *necessitates* or *excludes*:
 - * Something’s being a sphere necessitates its being round.
 - * Something’s being round excludes its being a square.
 - * And so on . . .
- When we articulate what properties are in terms of their instantiation conditions, what we articulate just is our knowledge of the norms governing linguistic expressions; we simply express this knowledge in a worldly mode.

- **Psychological Nominalism:** “All awareness of sorts, resemblances, facts, etc., in short, all awareness. . . is a linguistic affair,” (Sellars 1956, 289)

7 Broader Consequences

- **An Inversion of the Standard Order of Explanation:**

- **Josh Dever:** “Human languages are sophisticated tools for transferring mental states from one person to another,” (2012).
 - * The picture suggested by Dever is that language is something that we bring to bear upon a pre-existing set of contentful mental states, enabling us to encode them so that we may transfer them to other people.
 - * On the picture I’m suggesting, by contrast, our having the sort of conceptually contentful mental states that we do is *constituted* by our capacity to speak a language.

- * The concept of assertion is logically prior to the concept of thought: thinking something, in the sense of judging it, just is taking it that the assertion can be correctly made.
- **Jennifer Hornsby:** “Many philosophers will deny that *successfully saying something to another* could be a simple notion, or a fundamental one,” (2000, 93).
 - * **A Similar Idea in Philosophy of Perception:** The concept of *perceptually knowing something* must be a fundamental one, (McDowell).
 - * **The Common Thread:** *The fundamental concepts here not empirical, but are normative!*
- **The Study of Language is Not (at least Wholly) Empirical:**
 - There is a general orientation in contemporary philosophy of language to think of the discipline as (at least aspiring to be) an *empirical* one, essentially a branch of natural science.
 - * Previous proponents of the act-based approach such as Hanks and Soames see their developments of the view as a contribution towards this aspiration, providing “naturalized” conceptions of linguistic meaning.
 - On the account I’ve given, the knowledge we have of what it is to speak a language is not empirical, but *normative*. It is not like the knowledge we have of natural scientific phenomena such as those studied by physics. Rather, it is a distinctive sort of self-knowledge.
 - The broader task of understanding language in general at least has an essential dimension that is not a natural scientific enterprise. While some aspects of the task may deploy the methods of natural science, at least one essential component of the task of understanding human language is a distinctively *humanistic* enterprise. It is the study of language as the normative social practice to which we ourselves belong.

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