Defending semantic realism

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Abstract

The underlying question is how much and in what way speaker's understanding should be a determinant in theories explaining meaning. It is argued that semantic realism is best defined and defended within a metaphysical realism most naturally associated with externalist, causal, explanations of meaning. Attempts to defend semantic realism within a Wittgesteinian–Dummettian framework assume that theories of meaning must be theories of understanding, and that theories of understanding must be theories of use, such that use is manifestable in outward behavioural capacities. I argue that attempting to defend semantic realism in such frameworks leads inevitably to near paradoxical positions. © 2002 Published by Elsevier Science Ltd.

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1. Introduction

Simon Blackburn (1984), has proposed that throughout history philosophers have approached philosophy of language from different starting points. It is clear that any philosopher of language has to be concerned with three crucial relations: the relation between *thought and the world*, that between *thought and language*, and that between *language and the world*. One could imagine a triangle with *thought*, *world*, and *language*, at each point. As philosophies wax and wane, and come and go in fashion, philosophers may enter the triangle at different points for the purposes of doing theory of meaning. They will naturally assume one entry point as relatively more solidly established, less problematical, than the others. Thus they will enter there and attempt to explain the relations to other points from the more secure base. The antirealists I discuss here could be described as feeling more secure about, and so favouring, a certain kind of epistemology, hence, a *thought–perception–experience*

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locus. Since Wittgenstein however, many are terminally suspicious of both meta-physics and mentalism. Not surprisingly, then, their thought locus has been heavily influenced by behaviourist doctrines. Understanding, and other *prima facie* mental capacities are, by philosophers so affected, construed in terms of outwardly man-ifestable behavioural capacities. Such antirealists generally try to base theory of meaning within the thought-(i.e. behaviour)-language relationship. In tying meaning so closely to what we, as individual speakers, can know and do in publicly man-ifestable ways, they are in danger of losing sight of the capacity of language to reach out to a mind-independent world. The metaphysical realist, on the other hand, takes the *world* locus to be the more secure, thus the favoured entry point. The common-sense view is simply that the world exists and has the composition and properties that it does, independent of both our thought and language, while causally inter-acting with our thought and language. Metaphysics and mentalism have been reha-bilitated. Cognitive science has legitimated alternative mentalist theoretical paradigms. New options exist for explaining competence or understanding in terms of mental states and dispositions. For those who have escaped the British obsession with Wittgenstein, cognitive science and the exploitation of causal theories of refer-ence has provided promising ground for developing theories of meaning. Such the-ories are the natural and appropriate ground for defense of semantic realism. An approach adopting the thought-behaviour entry point to the language-mind-world triangle provides *unnatural* ground for defense of semantic realism. Nevertheless one finds certain philosophers, primarily within a Dummettian–Wittgensteinian meaning theoretical framework, defending semantic realism within the parameters of this sort of approach. That endeavour I wish to show to be unsatisfactory.

Semantic realism is, roughly, the view that properties of sentences like having meaning, or being true, are primarily objectively explained, typically in terms of causal relations and interactions, or correspondences, with an external world distinct from both thought and language. In this paper I will highlight some of the difficul-ties which arise for a defense of semantic realism within a Dummettian–Wittgen-steinian framework, using Alexander Miller (MS), as an example. His recent paper defending semantic realism against antirealist manifestability arguments will be the focus of the more detailed parts of my own discussion. It is true that in that paper Miller is restricting himself to a fairly technical defense of technical arguments against a version of semantic realism he adopts for the sake of argument, rather than propounds. However the view of semantic realism that emerges in the course of his defense is what I want to show to be problematic. It is representative of widespread views which advocate what is more likely than not a *wrong* conception of the rela-tion between language and thought-behaviour.

I will also in this paper indicate in broad outline the sort of realist theory of meaning I think is most likely to work, and say something about the relation of language and thought it encompasses. Commitment to metaphysical realism will be a foundation of the approach. Causal relations between linguistic items and parts of the world will be central. To some extent parallel causal relations between mental items correlated with linguistic items, and together with parts of the world, will be part of the story. But what *won't* be part of the story is that the ways thoughts are

involved in establishing meanings, by grounding linguistic expressions in the external world, become part of the explanation of meaning itself. Thus it will be an approach which, whilst establishing meanings in part by mental mechanisms, takes mind out of the explanation of meaning. This sort of approach will be contrasted with the one I criticize. There is a sense in which that approach also involves taking the mind out of meaning. But in a very different (Wittgensteinian-behaviourist) way. On the view criticized, *individual speakers' 'grasp' of meanings is still central to the explanation of meaning*. It is just that, following Wittgenstein, 'grasp' of meaning is construed not as involving an inner mental state of grasping an inner mental item, but as having a range of behavioural capacities which can be outwardly manifested.

2. The Dummettian–Wittgensteinian framework

What I am terming *the Dummettian–Wittgensteinian framework* is an odd kind of animal. It brings together strands of positivism and verificationism in a purported scientific explanation of meaning, with an approach to understanding derived from a viewpoint, Wittgenstein's, that holds semantics to be just an abstraction from concrete ways of life, and not amenable to scientific explanation. Be that as it may, such a framework does seem to thrive in some antirealist sectors of philosophy of language.

Antirealist objections to semantic realism often hinge on the notion that mastery of language involves understanding meaning, and that any theory of meaning must make this fact central. Language mastery or understanding has to be explained by a theory that links evidence and meaning, for speakers in a linguistic community, in a certain kind of way. In the tradition of description, or sense, theories of meaning, grasp of meaning is taken inwards: evidential matter relevant to meaning becomes the matter of speakers' descriptive beliefs determining what their words signify. But for the meaning theorists I criticize here, the evidential matter is treated more externalistically, in terms of grounding manifestable behaviours and public performances. This is one way to attempt a quasi-scientific explanation of language. It takes the best explanation to be one which adverts to dispositions to respond verbally to stimuli, and to exercises of specific behavioural dispositions in response to stimuli.[1] Such quasi-scientific behaviourist explanation is held superior to merely 'descriptive' explanation, 'which sees language-acquisition as the inculcation of dispositions to fit utterances with the (independently existing) real world'. Or to sense

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[1] This provides another way to formulate the antirealist objection to semantic realism. If speaker mastery boils down to speakers having sets of dispositions to fit utterances with observed evidential circumstances, including perception of the contexts in which others make approved utterances, then it seems that attribution of realist truth conditions has trouble finding some explanatory foothold. In the case of assertion of undecidable sentences, speakers assert sentences whose truth is in principle undetermined by all the available evidence. So if speakers are credited with a conception of realist truth conditions, in making such assertions, they are credited with *something which could not have been acquired in the way in which the speakers language was in fact acquired.* (Plattsm 1979, pp. 239–240.)

theories, which have in the recent past been regarded as anti-scientific, in pre-supposing a suspicious metaphysics and mentalism.

For many theorists of meaning, truth conditions are the core component of meaning. My present discussion is restricted to those interested in pursuing truth-conditional theories of meaning. A sentence's truth condition is simply *the circum-stance or condition in virtue of which the sentence is true if that circumstance or con-dition obtains, and not otherwise*. Where truth conditions vary, meanings vary. It will be useful for the purposes of later discussion to call the conditions whose obtaining is the condition of the sentence being true, the *content correlate* of a true sentence. Most of our true sentences are about an independently existing real world, so most content correlates are *in* the world. Content correlates of sentences have inner con-stituency corresponding to the structure of the sentence. The content correlate *of the cat is on the mat*, consists of a cat, and a mat, and a two-place relation existing between them whereby the cat is above the mat, and not vice versa.[2] One determines what the truth conditions of a complex sentence are in terms of the reference rela-tions of the parts of the sentence to properties and objects in the world. If one is a metaphysical realist, and is committed to certain theses about the nature of mean-ing, (including that reference is mostly causally explained), one is likely to hold that sentences can possess truth conditions, (and have meaning in virtue of such posses-sion), without speakers being in a position to determine whether or not the condi-tions obtain. The sentence, *Julius Caesar's favorite colour was green*, can have a determinate truth condition even if we can never find out if the condition held or not. Belief in truth conditions of this possibly capacity-transcendent sort is often referred to as belief in *realist truth conditions*. Belief in realist truth conditions is the position most naturally defined as *semantic realism*. By allowing sentences to possess realist truth conditions, semantic realists corporately allow an independent, possibly speaker-transcendent world, to determine what individual speakers mean, without speakers being able to incorporate their meaning of it within their own annexable experience. Semantic realism thus gives some concrete content to the notion of a mind-independent, external world, since what is actually in the world is one thing, and evidence concerning the obtaining or not of specific conditions is another.

Semantic realism, however, assumes a subtly but significantly changed form amongst some commentators. It is taken (by Miller and his interlocutors) to be the view that *for some declarative sentence S belonging to a domain of discourse D, our understanding of S consists in grasp of its truth conditions, which may be capable of obtaining or failing to obtain undetectably*. While my description of semantic realism is concerned with relations between properties of sentences and properties of a pos-sibly experience-transcending world, thus comfortably associated with metaphysical realism, Miller's definition of semantic realism refers essentially to what individual speakers *understand* and *grasp*. Thus it brings semantic realism within the para-meters of individual experience and knowledge. Antirealists want to close the gap in

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[2] The content correlates of false sentences may be in the world too. But not corresponding as a unit to the whole sentence. Rather the content correlates of the sentence *constitutes* are in the world, but not brought together in the way the sentence represents.

language between thought and reality in the name of understanding. The semantic realism accepted by Miller has become *epistemologized*. It has become epistemologized because the associated tenets of theory of meaning being assumed here are basically Dummettian. Michael Dummett has argued that the only way to give non-metaphorical content to realism is to treat it as a claim about the nature of truth conditions. Dummett also holds that *a theory of meaning must at the same time be a theory of understanding*. Thus, for Dummettian antirealists, semantic realism becomes transformed into a thesis about speakers' grasp of truth conditions. When Dummett is wedded to Wittgenstein, the resulting explanatory framework is going to turn defense of semantic realism into something that realists of the first sort outlined will hardly recognize, and something inherently problematic.

Simple commitment by meaning theorists to sentences having realist truth conditions as initially defined, is perceived by many antirealists as preposterous. Being able to accommodate *grasp* of meaning is held to be the benchmark of a successful theory of meaning, if one has, like Dummett, been influenced by Frege. Grasp of meaning cannot be construed as an inner mental state, if one has been influenced by Wittgenstein. Frege supposedly showed that the understanding of meaning cannot consist solely in associating a certain object in the world with a word as its referent. Nor merely in associating with a sentence a truth condition. There must be some *means* by which the association is effected, the *knowledge of which* constitutes *grasp of* meaning (Dummett, 1973, p. 93). Frege (1952) proposed that words have senses, and that the sense of a sentence is a function of the senses of the words of the sentence. For internalists, senses express thoughts which determine reference, and are both what speakers grasp in understanding language, and what determine sentences' truth conditions. If you demand instead that your account of truth conditions cohere with a non-internalist, Wittgensteinian account of understanding, the seeds are sown for the rejection of real semantic realism. Dummett, in What is a theory of meaning? (1975), concluded that Donald Davidson's theory was inadequate as a theory of meaning because it could not show what a speaker's understanding consists in. While Davidson's theory may be viewed as in some sense *giving the meanings*, by *giving the truth conditions*, for every sentence of the language, Dummett held that the mere *giving* of truth conditions in the form of direct ascriptions, would not account for speaker understanding. If the direct ascriptions as generated by the theory are not such as to lend themselves to a simple characterization of what knowledge of truth conditions consists in, then by not accounting for understanding, the theory would be unacceptable. A theory must account for *the way speakers recognize or judge those truth conditions to be fulfilled*. It must give an *explicit* account of speaker knowledge of meaning. A representation of knowledge of a practical ability, to be explanatory, must do more than just specify *what someone has to know to have the ability*, but also *explain what it is for him to have that knowledge*. Dummett holds that speakers' understanding consists in grasping the propositions that sentences express. However, such a 'grasp' must be explained in terms of specific *practical abilities of speakers*. Like Wittgenstein, Dummett held, eventually, that understanding (of meaning) must (at least) explain (if not be exhausted by) competent *use*, in a way that can be accounted for by externally and

publicly manifestable speakers' capacities. Many followers of Dummett have construed these abilities in verificationist terms.

The question put to truth-conditional meaning theorists by those adopting the foregoing approach to meaning theory then becomes, *if understanding is constituted by grasp of realist truth conditions, how could use manifest such understanding*? Any thesis about the truth conditions of a set of sentences is *inter alia*, for Dummett, a thesis about what our understanding of those sentences consists in. Understanding is sought primarily in practical abilities amounting to publicly available evidence-sensitive procedures for justifying the applicability of a sentence in a context of use. Where procedures exist for verification/falsification, we say the sentences are 'effectively decidable'. The challenge then is to show in these terms how understanding *realist* truth conditions could be manifested. One motivation for this requirement is to explain how language *use* is related to language *learning and to communication*, both of which also involve our capacity to *evaluate* the appropriateness or otherwise of others' utterances. Antirealist Crispin Wright's 'neighbourhood abilities', which he holds to manifest competent use, include grasp of a sentence's applicability conditions, inferential roles, and conditions under which we would use it to ascribe propositional attitudes to others in explaining their behaviour. These are all aspects of (potentially) publicly conveyable *uses* of language, involving manifestations of understanding of *communicable* and *learnable* meanings. Very often the capacities antirealists look to tend to be verificationist. For pure verificationists, knowledge of meaning is knowledge of what counts as direct or indirect verification of the sentence, i.e. establishing it as true. Realists distinguish truth and verification. So if realists commit themselves to the idea that speakers *grasp* truth conditions, then they purportedly have the problem that a recognition transcendent truth condition, while determining what would count to verify that sentence, also remains out of reach of potential verification. Such realists who also accept the manifestability requirement, seem obliged to hold that knowledge of the truth condition contains *an ingredient beyond* what is involved in knowing what would count as a verification. The realist then must show what empirical import that extra ingredient has. Otherwise there would be no real difference in the explanatory positions of realists and antirealists with respect to use. Antirealists doubt that realists can find any distinctive role for this additional knowledge that could enter into an effective account of language use.

3. Undecidable sentences

Dummett argues that any account of truth conditions will be unacceptable if it cannot cohere with a plausible account of understanding. If understanding is not having an inner state, but some practical ability, then it must be that understanding is manifested in use. Dummett argued directly that *realist* truth conditions are thus *not* suitable constructs for theories of meaning. It may be tempting to hold that knowledge of a realist truth condition could be manifested simply by the capacity to decide the truth of the sentence. But, arguably, in the case of a sentence which is not

in principle verifiable, the knowledge of its truth condition is not manifestable. Consider the sentence, *Cleopatra tripped over a step the day after she met Mark Antony*. The sentence is true if the individual named by *Cleopatra* did the bodily movement designated with respect to the construction designated in the time designated after the acquaintance mentioned with the second individual named. This is a specification of the truth condition or content correlate determined, following Frege, decompositionally, i.e. determined by a consideration of the referential properties of the sentence components, and the structure of the sentence. Let us suppose that in the *Cleopatra* sentence's case there is absolutely no evidence bearing on the obtaining or not of its truth condition, and we know that there is not (since Cleopatra forbade any record whatsoever of her embarrassing moments, and we cannot travel back in time to witness the event, or speak to possible witnesses). Back there on the day in question, the condition either obtained or did not. We have no way of ever knowing. The sentence is an *undecidable* one. Nevertheless, a real realist will still happily say that a specification of the sentence's (realist) truth conditions *is* a specification of the sentence's core meaning. We can determine the truth-conditional meaning (content correlate) of the sentence decompositionally, and without knowing, or ever being in a position to know, whether or not the sentence is true (or the content correlate actually obtains). Dummett we have seen rejects this possibility because for him truth conditions, to be of use to theories of meaning, must be grasped in a manifestable way. Realist truth conditions must be replaced by something like warranted assertibility conditions which are related to acceptability, he would argue. Surely, he would say, it is conditions and evidential standards relevant to the *acceptability of sentences* in immediate contexts of use, which explains their *use*, hence the 'meaning' relevant to *understanding?* If understanding cannot consist in grasp of realist truth conditions then in cases of undecidable sentences it must consist in grasp of some other features, since we clearly are capable of understanding and using such sentences.

Miller cites McGinn (1980) and Strawson (1977) as realists who have tried to meet the manifestability challenge for undecidable sentences. McGinn proposed it amounts to our skill in linguistically interpreting the behaviour of others, sometimes attributing realist beliefs. Strawson held that our abilities in relation to undecidable sentences all come down to recognitional capacities with respect to appreciable properties. Our grasp of meaning is displayed in response to recognizable conditions, even where those conditions involve the absence of evidence either way for the sentence holding or not. Antirealists reject these proposals because of *redundancy*. Basically the antirealist says that there is no reason to construe the beliefs attributed as a result of linguistically mediated interpretationist skills as having *realist* truth-conditions. The antirealist, as expressed by Hale (1997, p. 280), can accommodate the same interpretationist skills while construing the same beliefs attributed in terms of assertibility conditions. Likewise, Strawson's capacities are compatible with anti-realist warranted assertibility conditions. So there is *no need* to view these capacities as grounding knowledge of realist truth conditions over and above anti-realist conditions. The *transcendence element in itself* is *redundant* in relation to the ability predicated over realist truth conditions, whereas Wright was requiring

demonstration of a *specific* ability specifically discernible in relation to the *transcendence* element.

4. 'Semantic realism' and manifestability arguments

Miller defines *weak antirealism* as the view that realism must, but is unable to, justify grasp of specifically realist truth-conditions manifested in distinctly realist capacities, because whatever abilities realists cite *are compatible with* antirealist (epistemically constrained) construals. In a preliminary line of argument Miller questions the supposition that grasp of realist truth conditions must be explicated solely on the basis of speakers' *linguistic* performance capacities. He tries to bring out the absurdity of the restriction by considering a counterintuitive outcome generated by a possible general principle which could be used to ground the requirement. With regard to any feature F, sentence S, and speaker L, let the possible principle be:

for any F, whether or not the content of 'S' as understood by L has F must be constituted by facts about L's linguistic abilities.[3]

If we were to apply this principle under the instance of *truth* for F it would entail, absurdly, that whether or not a sentence as understood by a speaker were true, would depend on that speaker's linguistic performance abilities. If the sentence S is, *every even number is the sum of two primes*, the sentence as understood by Jones means that every even number is the sum of two primes. The postulated principle would have it, then, that whether or not *every even number is the sum of two primes* is true, whether every even number is the sum of two primes is constituted by facts about Jones' linguistic abilities. Miller claims to be taking the 'content' of the sentence for granted: for any 'S', its *content* is S. He concludes that it would be likewise absurd if you substitute for F the notion of *realist truth conditions*.

I am doubtful however that there is any such thing as just 'taking the content of any S for granted'. For me, the content of any S is its content correlate. As a semantic realist, I consider the content correlate to be typically found in the world. But for an antirealist the content correlate may be construed as the matter of experience and behaviour. There is no wholly neutral, theory-independent concept of 'taking the content for granted'. Under the guise of doing so, I maintain Miller surreptitiously sneaks in a few genuine semantic realist assumptions to generate his absurdity intuition. Why is it absurd to think that *every prime number is the sum of two primes* could be constituted as true, or a sentence have realist truth conditions, by virtue of speakers' abilities? It is only obviously absurd if you view truth or truth conditions along genuinely realist lines. For the realist it is indeed absurd that *the actual instantiation of those conditions (the content correlate)* could be, metaphysically, constituted by speaker abilities. However, if, along antirealist lines, the 'content of S as understood by L' were given a fundamentally epistemologically

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[3] This is my own simplified version of Miller's candidate principle.

constrained construal, such as 'the grasped meaning of *S*', and 'truth' were something like coherence in beliefs or experiential matter, grounding warranted assertibility or behavioural dispositions, where belief attribution or behaviour is inseparable from linguistic interpretation of speakers, then it may not be so clearly absurd to conclude that the explanatory features of grasped *contents* were essentially linked to, hence explained by, speakers' linguistic abilities. Thus in even framing this criticism of (the unmotivated restrictivism of) anti-semantic realism, there seems to be a surreptitious utilization of metaphysically realist presuppositions, which the antirealist is entitled to complain about. Indeed they already have.

On another tack, Miller takes inspiration from an earlier argument by McDowell. McDowell held there to be a trivial link between the content of an assertion and the notion of realist truth conditions: *To specify what would be asserted, in the assertoric utterance of a sentence apt for such a use, is to specify the condition under which the sentence (as thus uttered) would be true*. In asserting undecidable sentences speakers must know they are not asserting conditions whose obtaining they can be sure of being in a position to recognize. Thus the mere assertion of such sentences seems to involve an element of realism (McDowell, 1981, p. 322).

Wright (1993) complains with respect to McDowell's move that you cannot get to substantive semantic realism from a platitudinous link between assertion and truth. Wright grants that there is a trivial connection between the content of an assertion and specifying its assertoric truth conditions, and grants that this allows a trivial conception of 'grasp of truth conditions'. It is a platitude that minimally competent speakers know trivially that '*P*' says that P; or that a state of affairs necessary and sufficient for '*P*'s truth obtains. I will call this *understanding disquotational truth conditions, or disquotational understanding*. It is allowed that this trivial connection holds independent of speakers' neighbourhood abilities with '*P*'. However, Wright maintains that one could hold a truth-conditional theory of meaning based on *disquotational truth conditions*, while still making 'truth' itself epistemically constrained when it comes to *substantive understanding* of '*P*'. (Neighbourhood abilities will all be tied to recognisable conditions of appropriate assertion.) So Wright concludes that the possibility of *disquotational truth conditions* does nothing to support semantic realism, because it does not show how grasp of *disquotational truth conditions*, allied with epistemically constrained neighbourhood abilities, can amount to speaker's manifested understanding of how a state of affairs specified by an undecidable '*P*' can obtain undetectably (Wright, 1993, p.19). In which case, speakers' grasp of *disquotational truth conditions* therefore does nothing to justify commitment to realist (objective) truth or semantic realism. Miller begs to differ. If both realism and antirealism are compatible with the evidence, he contends, realism as the more intuitively plausible position is more acceptable than its rival. Furthermore, he purports to draw substantive conclusions from something like McDowell's triviality, in favour of semantic realism. I have concerns with both these lines of argument.

An underlying thought seems to be, that if capacities associated with manifestation of linguistic understanding are compatible with both realism and antirealism, then the antirealist is in no position to claim superiority for their own view, as they try to do. On the contrary, according to Miller it is the semantic realist who is in this

position. Optimism is based on the view that realism is the intuitively more plausible position. However the version of semantic realism at issue here is far from intuitively plausible, although the non-epistemologized version of semantic realism I introduced at the outset is. That version is plausible because it is most naturally associated with metaphysical realism, and compatible with the independence of theories of meaning and theories of understanding. I doubt anyone could call the view that we *grasp* recognition-transcendent truth conditions themselves, plausible. Optimism on Miller's part may result from drifting back to the non-epistemized version of semantic realism under the guise of 'taking the content for granted', which I drew attention to earlier. What is plausible is simply that, in virtue of metaphysical realism, our sentences have meaning by *having* recognition-transcendent truth conditions, but this is not essentially about our *grasping* anything.

The semantic realism that is defined for the purposes of Miller's discussion is a position which accepts that a theory of meaning is to be a theory of (Wittgensteinian) understanding. Knowledge of meanings is attributed so that the knowledge itself, as well as what is known, must be both accounted for and explanatorily active. Whether or not antirealists typically explicitly require that understanding be manifested in specifically linguistic performance, I think one can see how it would be natural for antirealists to gravitate to such a position. Manifestability arguments involve a conceptual nexus whereby it is not possible to isolate capacities relevant to manifestabilty, while ignoring the connection of manifestability to language acquisition, and to communication. The *same* understanding manifested in capacities for competent use must be that involved in explaining acquisition and communication, where sensitivity to the linguistic actions of others in given evidential circumstances is held to be the crucial theoretical factor. The contraints on theory are that contents have to be publically available, transferable, and (in principle) immediately transposable into recognizable behavioural features. It is only thus that we can understand ourselves, as a linguistic community, to be talking about the same things, to be agreeing or disagreeing about the same propositions. Fine-grained differences in meaning which could not be reflected in coarse-grained practical behaviours, could nevertheless be captured by variability in verbal dispositions. This forces one to hone in on speakers' linguistic capacities (Platts, 1979, pp. 239–240). But these verbal performance differentiations cannot further reflect differences between manifesting understanding with respect to recognition-transcendent sentential truth conditions, as opposed to recognition-available truth conditions, since in both cases behaviour differences are associated with the same sets of experiential differences. The way to deal with this problem is not to accept the theoretical background and then complain at some of its ramifications, it is rather to reject the theoretical backgound from the outset, framing and thus justifying semantic realism in an independent way.

Miller's positive argument, summarized below, also runs into difficulties. It accepts (1) that semantic realism involves grasp of realist truth conditions, and, (2) that this grasp must be shown not to be explanatorily redundant. The additional element of transcendence is extracted from the trivial assertion-truth link.[4]

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[4] I am using an abridged version of the sentence Miller used to frame his argument.

(SR)

  (i)   we understand the assertoric content of *Caesar had ten moles* to be that conditions obtain necessary and sufficient for its truth; and our understanding consists in our grasp of these disquotational truth conditions; (from the platitude trivially linking assertion and truth).

 (ii)   *Caesar had ten moles* is not effectively decidable (agreed by all).

(iii)   our understanding of *Caesar had ten moles* consists in our grasping truth conditions for which we have no procedure for determining their obtaining or not; [from (i) and (ii)].

(iv)   our understanding of *Caesar had ten moles* consists in grasping truth conditions which, if obtaining, we may be incapable, even in principle, of detecting; [from (iii)].

 (v)   Therefore, semantic realism. (because (iv) amounts to a statement of semantic realism).

Miller begins with a premise about disquotational understanding. By virtue of the platitude trivially linking assertion and truth it is held that a speaker understands the asserted content of any '*S*', including some undecidable '*S*', to be that conditions necessary and sufficient for its truth obtain. What does this claim amount to? It seems to me that if I assert '*S*', I understand myself to commit to the holding of S-conditions (i.e. conditions necessary and sufficient for truth of '*S*'). If you understand me to have made an assertion, you understand, trivially, me to have made that commitment. Such understanding is disquotational understanding. Anyone who is a language user, and understands that a sentence *is* an assertoric sentence of a language, knows this trivial fact. One need only have minimal linguistic competence with conventions of language to understand what goes on in using language to assert something. Disquotational understanding, insofar as it could be described as grasp of disquotational truth conditions, is thus itself a trivial notion. I could know of a sentence '*FS*' in a foreign language which I did not understand, if I knew from the context that '*FS*' was an assertion, that understanding its content consisted in understanding that conditions necessary and sufficient for '*FS*'s truth, viz., FS-conditions, were held to be obtaining. I need not have any substantive competence with or understanding of the sentence. But it is substantive understanding which is required to explain competent use with the sentence. *Disquotational understanding is not substantive and is thus not integral to explaining use*.

From grasp of disquotational truth conditions Miller attempts to draw a conclusion about understanding as grasp of transcendent truth conditions. He does this via a second premise which simply affirms the status of the '*S*' in question as not effectively decidable. That means there is no way for the assertor of '*S*' to determine whether the conditions necessary and sufficient for the truth of '*S*', obtain. When Miller concludes in (iii) that the speaker's understanding of '*S*' consists in grasping truth conditions which are undecidable, and equates this in (iv) with *grasping recognition-transcendent truth conditions*, in order to conclude (v) that this amounts to *a statement of semantic realism*, he *must* be taking the understanding involved to be substantive understanding. This is because he is still attempting to answer the

antirealist on their own grounds. Substantive understanding, which explains use, has been the theoretical postulate at issue all along. The manifestability principle requires that what *grounds* the practical capacities manifested in use also *explains* that use. However there is no justification at all for slipping from trivial understanding which does not explain use, to a conclusion about substantive understanding, which is what seems to occur in (SR), if it is supposed to be an argument that 'answers' the antirealist. Alternatively, if it is only disquotational understanding intended throughout (SR), then (SR) will not satisfy the antirealist that a substantive alternative realist position has been established, within the framework of theories of meaning both sides are purportedly accepting.

Minimally competent speakers have trivial understanding of trivial claims about truth conditions, emerging from the sheer act of making assertions. In undecidable cases, speakers are also devoid of abilities to discern the obtaining or not of those conditions. Presumably, *since speakers understand such sentences enough to assert them*, there must be some *substantive* basis of understanding. An antirealist like Wright will construe this substantive understanding in terms of warranted assertibility and neighbourhood abilities. What the antirealist will emphasize in relation to the '*S*' in question (say, *Caesar had ten moles*) is that no non-inert realist *core ability is manifested with respect to that sentence*. That is, there is no ability over and above neighbourhood abilities and explicative of neighbourhood abilities, which is responsive purely to the transcendence element of the sentence's substantive truth conditions, and which is effective in explaining use. Since the only understanding involved in Miller's premises is trivial disquotational understanding, the understanding in the conclusion can only be trivial too.

What has gone wrong with Miller's argument? Insofar as a speaker knows they are asserting an undecidable sentence, (and they may not), the speaker's understanding consists in knowing that his intentional act, as it were, overshoots accessible recognisable conditions for the sentence's applicability. I think it is right that this is an interesting point, and that it does reveal something about the realist beliefs underlying our general capacity as language users, but Miller attempts to go further than that. Miller concludes that the speaker's understanding consists in *grasping* those very same *in*accessible truth conditions, that the speaker understands themself to be shooting towards but not reaching. Perhaps one could maintain that it is just this awareness of overshooting, manifested in our capacity to go ahead and use such sentences anyway, in otherwise appropriate contexts of use, that constitutes speaker knowledge/ability that is distinctly and specifically relevant to the element of transcendence. But Miller does not attempt to do this in his argument, and in any case, it is hard to see how such a capacity could be anything but explanatorily inert with respect to use. If one plays the anti-realist game in accepting that grasp of truth conditions instantiates understanding that can explain use, where there are direct, causal, and manifestable links between what is grasped, how it is grasped, and how it explains use, then Miller's argument will fail.

The failure of Miller's dismissal of Wright's scepticism, and of Miller's argument for semantic realism, show how unproductive it is to try to establish semantic realism on the antirealists' own turf. The antirealist requires that realists show speakers'

ability to be responsive to the transcendence of the truth condition the way neigh-bourhood abilities are responsive to recognizable features of contexts of use, so that realist ability is manifested in some non-redundant way in use, in order to provide a distinct and specific explanatory determinant. Miller tries to wed nonsubstantive understanding of disquotational truth conditions with the *objective fact of undecid-ability*, which fact implies the *lack* or *absence* of certain core abilities for a speaker, in order to produce speakers' grasp of realist truth conditions. But this concoction will not meet the challenge. There must be some positive explanation of substantive grasp of meaning sufficient to explain use, and satisfy the distinct transcendence requirement, *at the same time*. The objectively noted *absence* of capacities with effective procedures cannot count as something substantively grasped, so cannot be a positive capacity capable of playing the required explanatory role.

A construal of the antirealist challenge rejected outright by Miller, demands that *if speaker understands S, there must be some ability of the speaker in regard to S which is justifiably described as 'grasp of potentially recognition-transcendent truth condi-tion', and, in addition, this same ability, or another its presence guarantees, merits description as an understanding of how it could be that the truth conditions of S could obtain undetectably*. Miller rejects this interpretation of the antirealist challenge as unreasonable because it requires in effect that speakers' competence includes mani-festing an understanding of *realism*. It is held to be obviously implausible to think that speakers should manifest understanding of realism, because realism is a theory, (and as such perhaps known only to philosophers). However it does seem to me that one is left open to this stepped-up version of the challenge insofar as one had already accepted as terms of reference that semantic realism entails grasp of recognition-transcendent truth-conditions which grasp can be manifested in explanatorily dif-ferentiated, non-inert ways in verbal performance. I base this conclusion on my judgement that the earlier mentioned redundancy objection is real and significant. Miller dismisses the redundancy objection on the grounds that it only shows that both realism and antirealism are compatible with manifestability, giving him lee-way to propose that realism is the superior because more intuitively plausible position. I have already expressed my doubts about this tack. If you accept the terms of refer-ence of the Dummettian–Wittgensteinian framework, and take the redundancy objection seriously, then you will be forced to generate some additional realist-trans-cendent element that goes beyond the experiential factors accessed by antirealists. What is there left but the fundamental metaphysical realist supposition itself?

Is it so implausible to attribute to ordinary speakers beliefs about realism? I earlier remarked that when speakers knowingly assert undecidable sentences which they know to be undecidable, they are aware of an intentional linguistic act which is overshooting what is available to them in contexts of use in determining the applicability of the sen-tence. It could be argued that there are many respects in which basically realist pre-suppositions could be part of the explanation of what speakers take themselves to be doing in carrying out their linguistic acts. For example, in using natural-kind terms we intend to refer to not just whatever fits some qualitative description, but what-ever has a nature which we may not yet even have discovered, hence whose existence transcends our evidence. If we, as I outline below, understand language as a social

phenomenon hooking onto the world by division of labour and causal mechanisms, the existence of (probably tacit) realist beliefs would not be so surprising. Obviously this is not a line of argument I can follow up here, but in my view it is not unreasonable to attribute to language-users basic realist beliefs and assumptions. In fact this may part of what it *is* to *be* a language user. So this aspect of the second version of the challenge does not bother me as it does Miller. The grounds on which I reject both versions of the challenge lies in the challenger's assumption that to be a semantic realist one needs to engage in the first place in theory of meaning that is simultaneously theory of understanding directly and exhaustively manifestable in use.

5. Semantic realism considered anew

Many philosophers explain meaning in such a way that sentential truth conditions are part of the explanation without it being integral to the explanation that speakers know or grasp those truth conditions.[5] Semantic realism would simply be the view that sentences can *have* recognition-transcendent truth conditions, and that their having these truth conditions is part of the explanation of their having the meaning they do. In turn, sentences having such meaning, explained in such a way, is part of a broader and more encompassing explanation of human behaviour. Semantic realism, on such an approach, is not essentially a theory of understanding, or of what speakers grasp. The view promulgated by people like Kripke, Donnellan, Putnam, Devitt, Lycan, Fodor, etc., is that compositional semantics and causal theories of reference lie at the heart of successful theories of meaning. Objective causal links between constituent linguistic tokens and objects in the world take up the burden of explanation of sentence meaning. Causal theories of meaning allow words to have reference without our having to attribute *knowledge* to speakers of *how* words have the reference they do. To a large extent people use language to refer to a real and objective world, and say meaningful things about it, while often in ignorance or error about referents or truth values of the sentences they use. The *Cleopatra* sentence has the truth conditions it has because its constituents have the referential properties they do, where this referential meaning can be explained in terms of causal-historical links to the world. Those causal-historical links transcend what individual speakers know. The content correlate of the *Cleopatra* sentence is inaccessible to present day speakers: so they are unable to verify or falsify the sentence. But this is of no consequence because the meaning of the sentence is explained by specifying how its truth conditions are compositionally and referentially determined, which may involve networks of causal connections stretching back in time and space, and where the specification need not impute knowledge of *how* reference is achieved to speakers who competently use the sentence.[6]

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[5] A point made often enough by Michael Devitt and others.

[6] I do think realist institutions are part of a complete explanation of intentional language use, but to accommodate this to one's theory does not require that one attribute explicit knowledge to speakers of theoretical realism in some form.

Putnam made us familiar with the notion of 'division of labour'. Language is a social phenomenon in which we all are able to use words to refer to things even though we have differing degrees of knowledge about the referents of those words. This is because some people's abilities are dependent on other people's abilities. Ultimately all speakers depend on those who have grounded terms in the real world in the first place. On any causal theory of meaning, thoughts and experiences are essential for groundings to occur, hence the establishment of meanings. But on the most successful theories, the thoughts and experiences associated with grounding events do not themselves become constitutive of the meanings of the terms grounded, and therefore are not necessarily part of the understanding of meanings. What is constitutive of meaning is simply the objective causal link which is established. What is crucial for understanding is just to be able to use tokens of the grounded terms in appropriate sentential contexts. This ability to so use depends on very basic grasp of conventions of language, and abilities to form sensible sentences with acquired expressions, but not on any specific knowledge about how the semantic properties of particular expressions were acquired. To have competence with a particular expression one can have been present at a grounding, or one can have borrowed a term which, at the end of a causal network spread through a linguistic community and across time, was once grounded. One simply has to have the thought that one is using the token *as* a *linguistic* token, intending to refer to whatever the linguistic token in fact refers to, in virtue of having been grounded within one's linguistic community.

Obviously, linguistic understanding and meaning are related in some way. Theories of understanding can, however, take many forms and need not be Wittgensteinian. Linguistic competence such as I have indicated above, consists in sets of practical abilities that are empirically anchored in the world, but do not consist in either propositional knowledge, nor specific verification-linked public linguistic performances. Cognitive science provides alternatives. Theories abound which postulate structural parallels between the composition of thought and the structure of language. To be a member of a language community is to have shared conventions about the word-forms linked with thought-forms. But this fact is largely explained in terms of objective causal networks. The intentionality of the thought, and the meanings of the words, are explained in the same way in a causal theory of meaning which incorporates a language of thought hypothesis of mental representation: neither need be given primacy. In terms of the thought–language–world triangle, an assumption of metaphysical realism is the best place to enter. However, from one's confidence with respect to a real independently existing world, one can, with the help of some language of thought thesis and cognitive science, explain the world–thought and world–language relations in tandem. It is the world-language relation which is the key to a *theory of meaning*, with a concomitant world-thought relation part of the *mechanisms* whereby the world-language relation is established. The further role of language in thought, and the role of thought in explaining behaviour, including linguistic behaviour, should be part of a more complete psychological *explanation of understanding*, or linguistic competence, but not necessarily part of a theory *of meaning per se*. In order to use language you need to have a basic practical ability

with the conventions of your linguistic community, and to do this you need to have a basic though implicit grasp of the sort of thing language is. Namely, an abstract, labour-divided, symbolic tool for representing the world and thought, useful for communication and knowledge gathering. Such implicit understanding probably comes along with the fact of being a language user. Much more would need to be said about options open to a realist in theoretically relating meaning, truth, understanding and use. That is something I cannot do here[7]. My intention here is merely to reiterate the fact that there are many such programs being actively pursued by realists. For such realists, the argument between Hale and Wright and McDowell and Miller et al., over 'semantic realism', is largely beside the point. My critique of the shortcomings of Miller's defense of 'semantic realism' suggests that this is a good thing.

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[7] It seems reasonable, since neo-cognitivism has rendered psychological explanation respectable once more, to explain linguistic use or competence in a way that postulates correlations between abilities with internal tokens (which we might view as internal content correlates), whose meanings are primarily causally referentially explained, and abilities with external tokens, whose meanings are similarly explained. In gaining abilities to use publicly available linguistic tokens we simultaneously acquire dispositional abilities to think with correlated metal tokens. The explanation of these interrelated abilities will no doubt be multi-levelled, but functionalist and compositional. It will be shown to be in virtue of having such internal abilities that we can use and understand a sentence like the *Cleopatra* sentence in the absence of its external content corrrlate.