

Michael Devitt

Overlooking Conventions

The Trouble With Linguistic Pragmatism

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 Springer

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Preface

I suppose that everyone who starts theorizing about language and its use is struck early by the need for some sort of distinction between what is “semantic” and what is “pragmatic”; between the meanings that expressions have in a shared language and meanings that are bestowed on them in context. The folk are endorsing such a distinction when they comment that a person “*said* that” such and such but “*meant* that” so and so. The temptation for philosophers who want to “get on with semantics” is to push this distinction under the rug. I did this in my first book, *Designation* (1981a).

But the distinction was already pressing in on me in my discussion of “referential” uses of definite descriptions in “Donnellan’s Distinction” (1981b). For, the standard response to Donnellan was to treat these referential uses as “pragmatic”, whereas I argued in that paper, and later works (1997b,c 2004, 2007a,b), that the uses should be treated as “semantic”: the meaning conveyed is not just a “speaker meaning” but rather a literal linguistic meaning arising from participating in a convention. I claimed that there was no principled theoretical basis for treating referential uses pragmatically. Another issue soon put further pressure on me to attend to the distinction. What is the meaning of a proper name? A surprising answer took hold in the 1980s. Influenced by the Kripkean revolution in the theory of *reference*, many adopted a “direct reference” view of a proper name’s *meaning*: the name’s meaning is simply its referent. How could this be, given the difference, obvious since Frege, between “Hesperus = Hesperus” and “Hesperus = Phosphorus”? The favorite direct-reference answer exported this problem to pragmatics: the difference between the two identity statements was not in the linguistic meanings of “Hesperus” and “Phosphorus” but rather in the information they pragmatically convey. I rejected this in “Against Direct Reference” (1989) and later works (1996, 2001, 2012d, 2015c, 2020b), arguing that the difference was semantic. Again, I claimed that there was no theoretical basis for a pragmatic treatment. These claims about a theoretical base forced me to develop, through these various works, a view of the semantics-pragmatics distinction.

Definite descriptions and direct reference are just two examples of how large the semantics-pragmatics distinction has loomed in recent philosophy of language. The

main cause of this has been an exciting movement roughly identified as “linguistic pragmatism” and/or “linguistic contextualism”. Its seminal work is Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson’s *Relevance* (1995). The movement challenges traditional “truth-conditional semantics” by arguing for pragmatic explanations of a large range of linguistic phenomena; there is “semantic underdetermination”; many think that we need to move to “truth-conditional pragmatics”. Major contributors to the debate include Kent Bach, Robyn Carston, François Récanati, John Searle, and Stephen Neale. This book aims, first, to look critically at the methodologies at work in the debate, and second, to tackle substantive issues about the semantic properties of a range of linguistic expressions and constructions.

My view of the semantics-pragmatics distinction starts with the idea that languages are representational systems that scientists attribute to species to explain their communicative behaviors. We then have a powerful theoretical interest in distinguishing, (a), the representational properties of an utterance that arise simply from the speaker’s exploitation of her language from, (b), any other properties that may constitute the speaker’s “message”. I call the former properties “semantic”, the latter, “pragmatic”. This motivates a fairly traditional semantics-pragmatics distinction. The key thing about semantic properties, emphasized throughout the book, is that they are (largely) conventional: conventions *create* linguistic meanings. This book aims to show that there are many more such conventions than linguistic pragmatists and contextualists have acknowledged. Many of their striking examples are like the referential uses of descriptions in being semantic not pragmatic. That is the substantive thesis of the book.

But how do we tell what properties are semantic? For years I have resisted the ubiquitous unscientific practice in linguistics and philosophy of appealing to intuitions about syntax, meaning, and reference. Instead of consulting these intuitions, we should look to language itself for evidence. In the present case, we look for a regularity in using an expression with a certain speaker meaning as evidence of a linguistic convention and hence of a linguistic meaning. That simple idea is my methodology in a nutshell.

It has taken me a long time to write this book partly because I have often been distracted by other fascinating topics, particularly biological essentialism and experimental semantics. The book started, in effect, with a paper delivered at an international conference, “Meaning”, at the University of Erfurt in Germany in September 2009. That paper was programmatic, the first presentation of the positive ideas that guide this book. The paper was subsequently delivered in many places, changing titles a couple of times as it progressed. It was finally published as “What Makes a Property ‘Semantic’?” (2013c). It formed the basis for Chap. 3 of this book. That paper began a series of publications that developed the main themes of the book. Many of these papers were first delivered in Croatia at the Dubrovnik conferences on the philosophy of linguistics and language that had been held in September every year since 2005 until Covid-19 struck. These conferences, organized by Dunja Jutronic, were as good as they get: focused, ample time for discussion, convivial company, marvelous swimming and weather; and all this in one of the most beautiful settings in the world. The second in the series of publications was

one of those, “Three Methodological Flaws of Linguistic Pragmatism” (2013d), which formed the basis for Chaps. 7 and 8. It was delivered (under another title) at the 2010 Dubrovnik conference. “Good and Bad Bach” (2013f) was delivered at the 2011 conference, with Kent Bach in attendance. It formed, along with “Unresponsive Bach” (2013g), the basis for many discussions of Kent’s work in the book. “Is There a Place for Truth-Conditional Pragmatics?” (2013b) was delivered at the 2012 conference. Modified versions of some of the ideas in that paper appear at various places in the book. The unpublished “On Handling Linguistic Pragmatism’s Examples in the Spirit of the Tradition” was delivered at the 2013 conference. It was my first serious attempt at what its title describes and was the beginnings of Chaps. 10 and 11. “Sub-Sententials: Pragmatics or Semantics?” (2018a) was first delivered at a workshop, “Topics in the Philosophy of Language” in Warsaw in April 2016. It formed the basis for Chap. 12. “Three Mistakes about Semantic Intentions” (2020c) was first delivered in Barcelona in September 2018. It formed the basis for Chap. 4. “A Methodological Flaw? A Reply to Korta and Perry” (2019) was first delivered at the 2018 Dubrovnik conference in response to a paper by Kępa Korta and John Perry (2019a), delivered by Kępa. It is part of the discussion of Korta and Perry in Chap. 7. Finally, “Semantic Polysemy and Psycholinguistics” (2021) was first delivered at the 2019 Dubrovnik conference. Chap. 11 is an expanded version of its main ideas.

At the 2015 Dubrovnik Conference, when my book project was well on the way to completion, I heard about Ernie Lepore and Matthew Stone’s book, *Imagination and Convention* (2015). It was clear from what I heard that a major theme of their book, like of mine, was that many allegedly pragmatic phenomena were actually the result of linguistic conventions and hence were semantic. I decided to wait until I had otherwise completed my book before reading theirs. When I did read theirs, I discovered that our books mostly discuss different phenomena and so are complementary. Both books argue that many meanings thought to be the result of pragmatic modifications of one sort or another are in fact conventional; as they say, “the rules of language...are richer than one might have at first suspected” (p. 148). But my focus in arguing for conventions is on “saturations” and polysemous phenomena that they do not consider. And theirs is on phenomena that I do not consider: speech acts, discourse reference, and “information structures” (encoded by intonation in English). Furthermore, their book includes a lengthy and fascinating discussion of figurative language (for example, metaphor, sarcasm, and irony) and evocative language (for example, humor and hinting), topics that are largely missing from mine. Aside from footnotes on “and” and intonation, I have not related the discussion in their admirable book to that in mine.

Kent Bach and Stephen Neale have both staked out interesting, distinctive, and detailed positions on the semantics-pragmatics issue. I am a great admirer of their works and have learnt much from them, and from many personal exchanges. However, we have some fundamental disagreements in our views of language and hence in our approach to the semantics-pragmatics issue. These differences loom quite large in my book. But this does not diminish my debt to Kent and Stephen.

I have received comments and advice from many others over the decade it has taken me to write this book, including from those who commented on the papers that the book draws on. Here is my best, but probably inadequate, attempt to list those who have helped in one way or another: Felipe Amaral, Andrea Bianchi, John Collins, Ingrid Lossius Falkum, Michael Greer, Steven Gross, Justyna Grudzińska, Daniel Harris, Carrie Jenkins, Dunja Jutronić, Rayaz Khan, Lucy MacGregor, Genoveva Martí, Gary Ostertag, Prashant Parikh, Carlo Penco, Francesco Pupa, Jesse Rappaport, François Recanati, Marga Reimer, Georges Rey, Esther Romero, Belén Soria, Robert Stainton, Richard Stillman, Elmar Geir Unnsteinsson, Agustin Vicente, Neftalí Villanueva Fernández, and Tomasz Zyglicz.

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Michael Devitt

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Chapter 1

Introduction



1.1 Background

Perhaps the most exciting development in recent philosophy of language has been the debate surrounding a group of philosophers and linguists that emphasizes the “pragmatic” features of language over the traditional “semantic” ones. The group emphasizes the extent to which the truth-conditional content (meaning)¹ conveyed by a sentence varies in the context of an utterance. They argue that this content, the utterance’s message, is constituted pragmatically in context much more than has been customarily thought. This characterization is a bit vague but it has to be to cover the diversity of views in question. The group’s seminal work is Dan Sperber and Deidre Wilson’s *Relevance* (1995).

My book has two main aims: to look critically at the methodology of the debate and propose a better one; to use the proposed methodology to argue for a fairly traditional position on the substantive semantics-pragmatics issue and against the radical views of the group.

I need a convenient way of referring to the group, abstracting from the many differences among them. This poses a problem. Sperber and Wilson, and many others in the group, are often called “linguistic contextualists” (Cappelen and Lepore 2005). But there are people, notably Kent Bach and Stephen Neale, who are not so-called and yet who share what I am taking to be the definitive property of the group: putting much more on the pragmatic rather than semantic side of the ledger than has been customary and, I will argue, than is appropriate. I wish my term to cover these people too. Given the group’s emphasis on the pragmatic over the semantic it seemed to me appropriate in an earlier work (2013c) to use the term ‘Linguistic Pragmatist’ for the group (and ‘Linguistic Pragmatism’ for their movement). I borrowed the term from Neale (2004), though I don’t claim to be using it exactly as he does. The term is not perfect because it has some very different uses: for example,

¹I use ‘content’ and ‘meaning’ fairly interchangeably.

in Dewey, and as a label for conceptual-role semantics.² (My usage will become much clearer in Sect. 3.5.) Finally, in labeling a position criticized as “Pragmatist”, I mean to imply that the position is common among Pragmatists not universal. Indeed, in at least one important case (Chap. 7), my criticism allies me with Bach and Neale. And sometimes a position labelled “Pragmatist” is held by people not in the group, sometimes by very many people; consider reliance on intuitions, for example (Chap. 2).

The folk seem to distinguish what a person *says*, or *literally says*, in an utterance from what the person *means*, from the intended message of the utterance. Paul Grice emphasizes a distinction along these lines between “what is said” and what is “implied, suggested, meant” (1989: 24).³ Sperber and Wilson’s distinction between *explicature* and *implicature* is related. And there are other similar distinctions. Canon Spooner provided an entertaining example of the need for a distinction: he once returned to the pulpit after a sermon to say, “When in my sermon I said ‘Aristotle’, I meant St. Paul”. And Grice gives many interesting examples including a famous one: a philosopher writes a reference in which he *says* that a student’s English is excellent and his attendance regular but what the philosopher *means*, his “conversational implicature”, is that the student is no good at philosophy (1989: 33). Many would say that what is said is a “semantic” matter but what is merely meant is a “pragmatic” matter.

According to a traditional view, stemming from Grice, a large part of “what is said” by an utterance is constituted by the conventional linguistic meaning of the sentence in the language employed by the speaker. These meanings are “known”, in some sense, by a competent speaker of the language simply in virtue of her being competent. They are said to be “encoded”. However, those meanings do not usually exhaust what is said, for two reasons. (1) A sentence will frequently be ambiguous: more than one meaning is conventionally associated with it. If a sentence is ambiguous, what is said when it is used, when it is “tokened”, will be partly determined by which of its meanings is in question in context. (2) An utterance may contain indexicals (and tenses), deictic demonstratives, or pronouns, the references of which are not fully determined simply by conventions. The reference of a “pure” indexical is partly determined by facts about the speaker: ‘I’ refers to whoever is the speaker, ‘here’ to his spatial location, ‘now’ to his temporal location. It is natural to say that the reference of a demonstrative like ‘that’ or a pronoun like ‘it’ is determined by what the speaker “intends” or “has in mind” in using the term. I shall say more about this in Sect. 4.1.

It is taken for granted by almost all that “what is said” involves disambiguation and reference determination as well as the conventional meanings of the language employed, as well as what is strictly encoded. The controversy is over whether there

²Thanks to Andrea Bianchi for drawing this to my attention.

³I have earlier placed quite a bit of trust in ordinary ascriptions of *saying that*: “So it is likely that, at least, we ought to ascribe to tokens that are thought and uttered the properties that we do ascribe and hence that those properties are meanings” (1996: 71). I acknowledged the apparent folk distinction between saying that and meaning that but did not make much of it (p.59 n.).

is anything else that is determined in context and goes into the truth-conditional message, perhaps into “what is said”. And over whether the constitution of any such context-determined extra is “semantic” or “pragmatic”. Pragmatists think there is a lot extra and that it is “pragmatic”. This yields their theses of “semantic underdetermination” and “truth-conditional pragmatics”.

Pragmatists are led to their theses by a range of interesting phenomena. Consider the following utterances:

- (1) I’ve had breakfast.
- (2) You are not going to die.
- (3) It’s raining.
- (4) Everybody went to Paris.
- (5) The table is covered with books.
- (6) John is a lion.
- (7) The party was fun until the suits arrived.
- (8) The road was covered with rabbit.

Taken literally, (1) seems to say that the speaker has had breakfast sometime in the past and yet, in context, it likely means that she has had breakfast this morning. Similarly, (2) seems to attribute immortality to the addressee but, in context, will mean something like that he will not die from that minor cut. Although (3) does not say so explicitly it surely means that it is raining in a certain location. (4) seems to say that every existing person went to Paris and yet the message it surely conveys is that everyone in a certain group went to Paris. According to the standard Russellian account, (5) makes the absurd claim that there is one and only one table and it is covered with books. Yet it is surely being used to say that a certain table is so covered. (6) says that John is a charismatic feline but means that he is courageous. What ruined the party according to (7) was not really the suits but the business executives wearing them. And what covered the road according to (8) was the remains of rabbits. Examples like these are taken to show that a deal of “pragmatic” enrichment is needed to get from what is “semantically” determined to the message, perhaps to “what is said”.

The debate has yielded many theories and a bewildering array of distinctions, and terminology. The many uses of “semantic”, “pragmatic”, and “what is said” are particularly troubling.⁴ One wonders immediately which terms and distinctions are appropriate. And this leads to a deeper question: *How should we get to the truth of the matter on the semantics-pragmatics dispute?* This methodological question receives a clear answer from the literature: we should rely largely, if not entirely, on our intuitions. I have earlier been very critical of this methodology in the theory of language (1996, 2006a, b, 2012a) and continue to be here. I think that we need to do much more: we need to find a respectable scientific motivation for our theories and distinctions and a scientifically respectable way of testing them.

So, in Chap. 2, I criticize the practice of relying on intuitions, calling it the “*First Methodological Flaw of Linguistic Pragmatism*”. I later argue that there are two

⁴See Bach (1999: 81–2) for a nice “chronology of formulations” of the semantics-pragmatic distinction in the last century.

more important flaws, discussed in Chaps. 7 and 8, respectively. The “*Second Methodological Flaw of Linguistic Pragmatism*” is that of confusing “the meta-physics of meaning”, focused on the speaker and concerned with *what constitutes* what is said, meant, etc., with “the epistemology of interpretation”, focused on the hearer and concerned with *how we tell* what a speaker said, meant, etc. The “*Third Methodological Flaw of Linguistic Pragmatism*” is the acceptance of “Modified Occam’s Razor”, understood as advising against the positing of a new sense wherever the message can be derived by a pragmatic inference.

The methodology I urge instead yields a theoretically principled distinction between two sorts of properties of an utterance. On the one hand, there are properties that the utterance has *simply in virtue of the speaker’s exploitation of her language*. On the other hand, there are properties, which may or may not be different from those ones, that constitute “the message” the speaker intends to convey. I call the first sort “semantic” and part of “what-is-said” or “the proposition said” and the second sort part of “the message” or “the proposition meant”. I call any of the latter that are not semantic “pragmatic”. Evidence of what-is-said is to be found in evidence of the linguistic rules that have been largely established by conventions. For that evidence we look to the best explanations of regularities in linguistic usage (Chap. 3).

After discussions of speaker meanings (Chap. 4) and conventions (Chap. 5), I take a critical look at the different notions of what-is-said proposed by Kent Bach and Stephen Neale (Chap. 6).

From this methodological perspective, I confront the challenge that Linguistic Pragmatists have posed to the tradition. I argue that three sorts of properties constitute what-is-said: those arising from (i) convention, (ii) disambiguation, and (iii) reference fixing. This view of what-is-said is close to the traditional one that the Linguistic Pragmatists oppose. I then argue, controversially, that almost all of the striking phenomena that they have emphasized exemplify properties of sorts (i) to (iii). There are more of such properties than we have previously acknowledged: much more of the content of messages should be put into the convention-governed what-is-said- into semantics – than has been customary; conventions have been overlooked. Contrary to what the Pragmatists claim, there is no extensive “semantic underdetermination”. The new theoretical framework of “truth-conditional pragmatics” is a mistake. The striking phenomena should be accommodated within a traditional framework (Chaps. 9, 10 and 11).

Some terminological points. (a) The words we use to talk about linguistic phenomena, like ‘sentence’ and ‘word’ itself, have a familiar type-token ambiguity. Where it is not clear from the context, and where it matters, I will indicate whether I am talking of a type or a token. (b) I shall type such linguistic tokens solely by their overt physical properties, thus yielding what I have called “physical types” (1981a: 10). They might also be typed partly by their semantic properties thus yielding what I have called “semantic types” (*ibid*). I shall not be so typing them. So, on my usage, tokens of ‘bank’ referring to financial institutions and ones referring to river sides are tokens of the same word-type (which is not to deny, of course, that for some purposes it may be appropriate to type them semantically and so of different types).

(c) In talking about language, the physical types in question are typically sound or inscription types but they can be types in other media. (d) I use ‘utterance’ to refer to an act of expressing a thought by producing a sentence (or, in circumstances to be discussed in Chap. 12, producing a sub-sentence). And the reference should always be taken to be to an utterance-*token* unless otherwise indicated.

Finally, the convention in philosophy is to use single quotation marks to refer to an expression. In linguistics, the convention is to use italics. I shall mostly follow the philosophical convention but not when discussing a linguist and it would be off-putting.

1.2 Summary of Chapters

1.2.1 Chapter 2: *Reliance on Intuitions*

How should we discover the truth about language? The received view among Linguistic Pragmatists, indeed among philosophers of language generally, is that we should proceed by consulting intuitions about language. I argue that this is a mistake and constitutes the *First Methodological Flaw of Linguistic Pragmatism*.

Why is it thought to be appropriate to consult intuitions? (1) A seemingly popular answer is that these intuitions are a priori. I argue that, even if we suppose that there is some a priori knowledge, we should not suppose that we have it of meanings. (2) Stich has suggested that philosophers might be guided by linguistics in answering the question: competent speakers of a language derive their semantic intuitions, like syntactic ones, from linguistic rules of the language embodied in their minds. I argue that this “voice of competence” view of our linguistic intuitions is mistaken.

Instead, I urge that intuitions are empirical theory-laden central-processor responses to phenomena differing from other such responses only in being immediate and fairly unreflective. This being so, we should prefer the intuitions of the more expert philosophers to those of the folk. More importantly, we should seek direct, less theory-laden, evidence by studying what the intuitions are *about*, the linguistic reality itself.

1.2.2 Chapter 3: *The Semantics-Pragmatics Distinction*

I draw two morals from Chap. 2. (1) We should not take any of the intuitively appealing notions thought to be relevant to the semantics-pragmatics distinction – for example, *what is said*, *explicature*, *proposition expressed* – for granted. Notions like these need *theoretical motivation*. (2) Second, we should not look simply to our intuitions for evidence of what our favored notions apply to: we need more direct evidence from linguistic usage.

Concerning (1), I argue that the theoretical basis we need is to be found by noting that languages are representational systems of symbols that scientists attribute to species to explain their communicative behaviors. We then have a powerful theoretical interest in distinguishing, (a), the representational properties of an utterance that arise simply from the speaker's exploitation of a linguistic system from, (b), any other properties that may constitute the speaker's "message". I call the former properties "what-is-said" and "semantic", the latter, "what is meant but not said" and "pragmatic". From this theoretical basis I argue that what-is-said is constituted by properties arising from (i) linguistic conventions, (ii) disambiguations, and (iii) reference fixings.

I then frame the semantics-pragmatics dispute as one between these two doctrines:

SEM: Setting aside novel uses of language, what-is-said (in my sense) is typically the truth conditional speaker-meaning (content) of an utterance, the message conveyed.

PRAG: Even setting aside novel uses of language, the truth conditional speaker-meaning (content) of an utterance, the message conveyed, is seldom, perhaps never, constituted solely by what-is-said (in my sense). The message is always, or almost always, the result of pragmatic modification.

I foreshadow the argument in Chaps. 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12 that the striking examples produced by Linguistic Pragmatists can be accommodated by SEM. This argument counts against the popular Pragmatist theses of "semantic underdetermination" and "truth-conditional pragmatics". SEM is very much in the spirit of the tradition that Pragmatists reject.

Concerning (2), we need evidence from usage of the linguistic rules, rules that have been largely established by conventions. These rules reveal themselves in the regular use of certain forms for certain speaker meanings. We seek evidence of such regularities in the corpus and by the method of "elicited production". Where we find a regularity we must consider whether it is best explained by supposing that there is a linguistic, probably conventional, rule of so using the expression.

1.2.3 Chapter 4: *Speaker Meanings and Intentions*

There is much talk of intentions in semantics that I argue is mistaken:

- (I) In virtue of what does a speaker using a name or demonstrative refer to x ? A popular answer is: because he *intends to refer to x*. I have four objections. (1) This answer, unlike another popular one – because *he has x in mind* – is too intellectualized to be even a good starting point. (2) It is theoretically incomplete: In virtue of what did the speaker intend to refer to x ? (3) Once completed, it is redundant. (4) It is misleading.

- (II) What explains the speaker meaning of a sentential utterance? A central idea of Gricean “intention-based semantics” is that this meaning is constituted by the speaker’s intention to communicate a certain content to an audience. I argue that the idea that this intention is necessary for a meaningful utterance is psychologically implausible and theoretically unmotivated. The basic act of speaker meaning is one of *expressing a thought*. For a speaker to mean that *p* by an utterance is for her to be intentionally expressing a thought that *p*. Expressing a thought is an act common to speaking, writing, emailing, and so on. Game theoretic considerations bear on the choice of an utterance to make but not on the explanation of the nature of the one that is made.
- (III) It is standard among Griceans to believe that there is some constitutive/normative constraint on what a speaker can intend by an utterance, a belief arising from one about a constraint on intentions in general. The alleged constraint varies from the astonishingly strong “positive” one that *X* cannot intend to *A* unless *X* believes that she will *A* to the much weaker “negative” one that *X* cannot intend to *A* unless she lacks the belief that she cannot *A*. I argued that there are no such constitutive/normative constraints on intentions.

1.2.4 Chapter 5: Linguistic Conventions and Language

Conventions are important to a theory of language because they are the typical *cause* of a linguistic expression having its meaning. But, contrary to what some seem to think, conventions do not *constitute* the meanings of a language. And a linguistic convention is not constituted by the regularity it usually gives rise to. The literal meaning of a word in a person’s idiolect is constituted by her disposition to associate the word with that meaning in the production and comprehension of language. If she has that disposition *because*, in an appropriate way, other members of her community have it, then that meaning is conventional.

John Collins, a follower of Chomsky, is highly critical of appeals to conventions in explaining language. Indeed, he doubts that talk of conventions could be theoretically respectable anywhere until it has been fully explained. I argue against this view. Chomsky himself claims that the “regularities in usage” needed for linguistic conventions “are few and scattered”. Furthermore, such conventions as there are do not have “any interesting bearing on the theory of meaning or knowledge of language”. I argue that these claims are very mistaken: there are many linguistic conventions and these are central to explaining language.

The chapter concludes by discussing malapropisms and related phenomena in responding critically to Davidson’s claim that “there is no such thing as a language... we should give up the attempt to illuminate how we communicate by appeal to conventions”.

1.2.5 Chapter 6: Bach and Neale on “What Is Said”

Kent Bach’s “semantic” notion of what-is-said is more austere than mine. Like mine, his notion includes properties of an utterance arising from conventions, disambiguations, and the reference fixing of pure indexicals (and tenses) but unlike mine it excludes properties arising from the reference fixing of demonstratives, pronouns, and proper names. What a speaker says using those referential devices is “semantically incomplete”, only “a propositional radical”. Bach supports this austerity by claiming that the reference fixing of demonstratives, pronouns, and proper names, unlike that of pure indexicals, is dependent on speakers’ communicative intentions. I argue that this is not a theoretically sound motivation for the exclusion. The referents of pure indexicals depend as much on speakers’ intentional participation in referential conventions as does the referents of demonstratives, pronouns, and names. Reference does not require communicative intentions but, even if it did, that would not support discrimination against demonstratives, pronouns, and names when including referents in what is said.

This criticism of Bach was first presented in my “Good and bad Bach” (2013f). Bach responded (2013) without mentioning the criticism but accusing me of neglecting the motivation he has presented in a passage he cites. I argue that the passage does not motivate his austerity.

Stephen Neale is strongly opposed to notions like Bach’s and mine which he calls “transcendental”. Underlying Neale’s position is a radical dismissal of utterance meanings altogether. He thinks that expression-types have meanings and that a speaker means something by her utterance. However, what is meant is the content of her intention *but not* a property of the utterance itself. He sees no theoretical role for utterance meanings. In particular, he claims that there is a technical difficulty in their being the subject of a compositional semantics. In contrast, my theory is committed to utterances, and their expression-tokens, having meanings.

I present three reasons for this position. (i) Drawing on Chap. 3 I argue that the most basic task for a theory of language is to explain in virtue of what utterances play their striking role in the causal nexus of human lives. It is for that purpose that we should ascribe meanings. And we need to ascribe them to tokens not types because it is tokens that play the causal role. (ii) Talk of types is redundant. Much linguistic theory and its application can be taken straightforwardly to be talking about expression-tokens. And parts that seem to be talking of types can be paraphrased into talk of tokens. This applies, I argue, even to talk of “aphonics”, thus removing Neale’s technical difficulty. (iii) Even if there were meaningful expression-types, meaningful expression-tokens would be more fundamental: the types would be abstractions from the tokens; they would depend for their very existence on the tokens.

I also take issue with Neale’s view that the meaning of an expression-type *constrains* what a speaker can mean by it but *never constitutes* that meaning. It is a consequence of SEM that that type meaning typically constitutes the speaker meaning.

1.2.6 Chapter 7: Confusion of the Metaphysics of Meaning with the Epistemology of Interpretation

This confusion is the *Second Methodological Flaw of Linguistic Pragmatism*.

There is an obvious difference between the study of the properties of utterances – what is said and what is meant – and the study of how hearers interpret utterances. We might say that the former study is concerned with *the metaphysics of meaning*, the latter, with *the epistemology of interpretation*. Yet confusion of these two studies is almost ubiquitous in the pragmatics literature (Levinson, Carston, Sperber and Wilson, Recanati, Bezuidenhout, Stainton, Korta and Perry). We have noted that many Pragmatists think that conventions, disambiguation, and reference fixing semantically underdetermine what is said. As Robyn Carston says, these Pragmatists believe that “pragmatic inference (that is, maxim-guided inference) is required to make up the shortfall” (2004: 67). This is the confusion. If there were a shortfall, it would be made up, just like the standard disambiguation and reference fixing, by something non-inferential that the speaker has in mind. Pragmatic inferences, of which Gricean derivations of conversational implicatures are an example, have absolutely nothing to do with any shortfall in the constitution of what is said. Pragmatic inference is something the hearer may engage in to interpret what is said.

Reinaldo Elugardo and Robert Stainton acknowledge the distinction between the metaphysical and epistemic determination but then surprisingly claim that it does no “undue harm sometimes to ignore the distinction in practice” (2004: 446)! They claim that doing so is not a “mere confusion” and that the topics are “inextricably linked”. I argue that their reasons for thinking this are flawed. First, their defense of the confusion would not get off the ground without two Gricean assumptions that I have rejected in Chap. 4: that communicative intentions determine content; second, that there is a certain constitutive/normative constraint on a speaker’s intentions. But suppose we grant these two assumptions. Elugardo and Stainton’s argument still has two failings. (A) At most it demonstrates an evidential impact of epistemic on metaphysical determination. That is no justification for ignoring the distinction between the two determinations. (B) There is no reason to believe that what a hearer can figure out about what is asserted/stated/said provides evidence of what could be a metaphysical determinant of what is asserted/stated/said.

Ignoring the distinction between the metaphysical and the epistemological wrongly encourages the idea that meanings are pragmatically constituted and hence a doctrine like PRAG.

1.2.7 Chapter 8: Modified Occam’s Razor and Meaning Denialism

The chapter looks critically at two conservative strategies that work against SEM by excluding new meanings. First, Grice’s “Modified Occam’s Razor”: “Senses are not to be multiplied beyond necessity”. This is commonly construed as advising against

positing a new sense *wherever there is a Gricean (or other pragmatic) derivation* of the message from an uncontroversial old sense, without any consideration of whether that derivation is part of the best explanation of the message. I argue that this way of thinking (Grice, Recanati, Carston, Bach, Ruhl, Cruse, Falkum) is the *Third Methodological Flaw of Linguistic Pragmatism*.

Grice's Razor, as commonly construed, cannot be right because it would make all metaphors immortal. The metaphorical meaning of a word is derived from its conventional meaning. Over time, a metaphorical meaning often becomes regularized and conventional: the metaphor "dies". Yet a derivation of what is now a new conventional meaning from the old conventional meaning will still be available. The common construal loses sight of why we posit a language in the first place.

Where a word is regularly used polysemously, the onus is much more on the denier of a new meaning than on the positer of one. A pragmatic explanation of such a regularity needs to meet the "psychological-reality requirement", showing that the explanation's pragmatic derivation has an appropriately *active* place in cognitive lives. In interesting cases, like alleged generalized conversational implicatures, speakers and hearers are not *conscious* of derivations having such a place. A pragmatic explanation then faces two powerful objections. The Occamist Objection that the explanation posits subconscious processes that need, but lack, independent evidence. The Developmental Objection that we have good reason to suppose, a priori, that these processes do *not* exist. We should expect that a pattern of successful communication using a word with a certain once-novel speaker meaning would lead to it having that meaning conventionally. For that is the sort of process that gave us our language.

Bach is an extreme meaning denier. Modified Occam's Razor is one of his strategies for this. He (2013) has responded dismissively to an earlier version of my criticism (2013f) of his embrace of the Razor. I argue that he has not answered the criticism.

Bach has another strategy for excluding new meanings: many regularities in usage are to be explained not as conventionalizations but as *standardizations*. Standardizations are said to differ from conventionalizations in their relation to "mutual beliefs" and in their involving "streamlined" pragmatic inferences. I argue that Bach's account of this distinction is not satisfactory. More importantly, he has not shown that his favorite cases of standardization are not conventionalizations. And that is what I suspect they mostly are.

The strategies for meaning denialism discussed in this chapter have been very costly, misleading people into thinking that meanings that are, as a matter of fact, context-relative because expressions are ambiguous must be treated as pragmatically constituted. This has led to the mistaken thesis of PRAG.

1.2.8 Chapter 9: Referential Descriptions: A Case Study

My discussion elsewhere of referentially used definite descriptions is a paradigm of the approach I am urging to support the SEM view of the examples that motivate Pragmatism. Many Pragmatists treat these referential uses in a Gricean way as involving conversational implicatures (or something similar). Others treat them in a Relevance-Theoretic way where both referential and attributive uses involve other sorts of pragmatic modifications. I argue that referential (and attributive) uses are best explained semantically.

The Argument from Convention (as Neale calls it) provides the positive argument for this SEM view. The basis for the thesis that descriptions have referential meanings is not simply that we *can* use them referentially for, as the Pragmatists point out, we can use *any* quantifier referentially. The basis is rather that we *regularly* use descriptions referentially. Indeed, the vast majority of uses of descriptions are referential. The regular use exemplifies a semantic convention.

The argument in Chap. 8 that appealed to dead metaphors shows that for the alternative PRAG explanation to be right, more is required than that the singular proposition arising from a referential use of a definite can be pragmatically derived from the literal meaning of the utterance. The PRAG explanation, whether Gricean or Relevance-Theoretic, must meet the “psychological-reality requirement”, showing that the explanation’s pragmatic derivation has an appropriately *active* place in cognitive lives. This requirement has not been met, nor has there been any psycholinguistic attempt to meet it. According to the Developmental Objection it is unlikely to be met. According to the Occamist Objection, we should then prefer the SEM view.

There is a further objection to Gricean versions of PRAG explanations. An important feature of such explanations of a referential use of ‘the *F*’ is that a speaker who is pragmatically implying a singular proposition about a particular object in mind must also be conventionally conveying a general proposition about whatever is uniquely *F*. Attending to incomplete descriptions, I use an “ignorance and error” argument to show that this condition could frequently not be met.

I reinforce this case by considering Bach’s lengthy defense of the Russellian *status quo*. He argues that referential uses are “akin to” generalized implicatures. The heart of his argument is the claim that the quantificational meaning plays a “key role” in referential uses. This claim is not supported and the argument fails.

That concludes my main case for the SEM view, but I add three further arguments. Finally, I look critically at Neale’s view (2004) that the debate between referentialists and Russellians is “the product of a powerful illusion”. The debate is over a real issue and the referentialists have won.

1.2.9 Chapter 10: Saturation and Pragmatism's Challenge

The challenge posed by Linguistic Pragmatists stems from the many examples of context relativity that their investigations have revealed. In arguing for SEM and against PRAG, I divide these examples into two groups, one concerned with saturation, discussed in this chapter, the other concerned with polysemy, discussed in the next.

After a brief rejection of “meaning eliminativism”, I argue that a range of phenomena, including weather reports, quantifications, ‘ready’, ‘qualified’, genitives, and ‘enough’ should be explained by taking their linguistic meanings to demand saturations in context; the conventionally established meaning has an implicit slot to be filled. This is the best explanation of the regular saturation of these expressions to convey messages.

The rival explanation is that these saturations arise from pragmatic modifications of one sort or another. But these PRAG explanations, like those before (Chaps. 8 and 9), face the heavy onus of the psychological-reality requirement: they must show that the pragmatic processes have an appropriately *active* place in cognitive lives. Once again, this requirement has not been met, nor has there been any psycholinguistic attempt to meet it. According to the Developmental Objection it is unlikely to be met. According to the Occamist Objection, we should then prefer SEM.

I conclude by considering an objection to SEM's positing of implicit slots to be filled. Bach objects to positing any slot that is not “there” in the favored syntax, even if only as an aponic. This reflects a commitment to what Carston calls “the Isomorphic Principle”, according to which the structure of a sentence is an image of the structure of the thought it expresses. I reject this “tyranny of syntax”, arguing that no such principle *could* show that a slot-filling convention for, say, quantifiers or ‘ready’ is *impossible*. It is always an open question to what extent, if any, a meaning is to be explained in terms of a matching syntactic structure. I reinforce this point by siding with Perry against two syntax-driven critics of his discussion of “unarticulated constituents”, Stanley and Sennet. As Neale argues in criticizing Stanley, Perry's position implies no interesting syntactic thesis. Neither does mine.

1.2.10 Chapter 11: Polysemy and Pragmatism's Challenge

According to SEM the regular use of a polysemous expression with a certain meaning is typically a semantic phenomenon not a pragmatic one: absent novel spur-of-the-moment modifications or implicatures, the polyseme typically contributes one of its encoded meanings, selected in context, to the message of an utterance. Regular polysemy is discussed and it is argued that some popular alleged examples of this – for example, ‘book’, ‘city’ – involve a mistaken metaphysics and should be dismissed. Other issues discussed include “underspecified” monosemy, co-composition, and generalized conversational implicature.

I aim to bring the psycholinguistic literature on polysemy to bear on the SEM-PRAG. This requires some preliminary work discussing some expressions that

feature prominently in that literature: “Sense Enumeration Lexicon”; “underspecification”; “overspecification”; “represented and stored”; “information-rich”. I then defend SEM from objections, including some from psycholinguistics and one from the phenomenon of “copredication”.

The contrary view of polysemous phenomena, PRAG, is that a pragmatic modification of meaning typically plays a role in constituting messages. This generates a psychological-reality requirement: pragmatic explanation is committed to there being regular subconscious psychological processes in speakers and hearers that are appropriately different from the standard convention-exploiting ones, whatever they may be, involved in the use of ambiguous terms. I offer Occamist, Developmental, and Abstract-Core Objections to PRAG, which place a heavy evidential burden on PRAG. I argue that the evidence on linguistic processes provided by psycholinguistics does not come close to fulfilling that burden. At this point there seems to be no evidence from the study of the mind that counts significantly against the evidence from behavioral regularities for the SEM view of polysemy.

1.2.11 Chapter 12: *Sub-Sententials: Pragmatics or Semantics?*

Stainton points out that speakers “can make assertions while speaking sub-sententially”. He argues for a “pragmatics-oriented approach” to these phenomena and against a “semantics-oriented approach”. In contrast, I argue for SEM, a semantics-oriented approach: typically, what is asserted by a sub-sentential of a form that is regularly saturated in context is a proposition, a truth-conditional semantic property of the utterance. Thus, there is an “implicit-demonstrative convention” in English of expressing a thought that a particular object in mind is *F* by saying simply ‘*F*’. I note also that some sub-sentential assertions include demonstrations and argue that these exploit another semantic convention for expressing a thought with a particular object in mind. So, sub-sententials are to be treated like the sentential examples in Chap. 10.

I consider four objections that Stainton has to a semantics-oriented approach. One is aimed at Stanley’s semantics-oriented approach in particular. Stanley claims, in Stainton’s words, “that much, or even all, of such speech is actually syntactically elliptical – and hence should be treated semantically, rather than pragmatically” (2005: 383–4). Stainton objects that there is no such ellipsis with the sub-sententials in question. My semantics-oriented approach does not make the syntactic-ellipsis claim and so is not open to the objection. Still, the objection is theoretically interesting. I wonder about its appropriateness. I go on to reject the other three objections: “too much ambiguity”; “no explanatory work”; and “fails a Kripkean test”.

Nonetheless, the message of *novel* sub-sentential utterances, perhaps asserting only a fragment of a proposition, must come at least partly from pragmatic enrichment. To this extent I am in accord with a pragmatics-oriented approach. But it is not an interesting extent because novel nonconventional uses of language must obviously be explained pragmatically.

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Chapter 2

Reliance on Intuitions



I noted in Sect. 1.1 that the received view among Linguistic Pragmatists is that we should find the truth about language by consulting intuitions. And I claimed that this is the *First Methodological Flaw of Linguistic Pragmatism*. This chapter will support that claim.¹

2.1 The Received View

First, we need to support the attribution of this methodology to the Pragmatists. Consider what some leading figures have to say. Stephen Neale gives the following sweeping endorsement of the role of intuitions:

Our intuitive judgments about what *A* meant, said, and implied, and judgments about whether what *A* said was true or false in specified situations constitute the primary data for a theory of interpretation, the data it is the theory's business to explain. (2004: 79)²

Robyn Carston thinks that the various criteria in the pragmatics literature for placing “pragmatic meanings” into “what is said”, “in the end,...all rest...on speaker/hearer intuitions” (2004: 74). François Recanati claims that ““what is said” must be analysed in conformity to the intuitions shared by those who fully understand the utterance” (2004: 14).

This enthusiasm for consulting intuitions is not confined to the Linguistic Pragmatists, of course. Indeed, it would be hard to exaggerate both the apparently dominant role of such intuitions in the philosophy of language and the agreement among philosophers that these intuitions should have this role. This emphasis on

¹The discussion is a short version of a position developed in many earlier works cited below. For more, see particularly Devitt 2006a, b, Chap. 7, 2006d, 2012b, 2014c, 2020a.

²In his latest work, Neale urges a very different and, in my opinion, much more appropriate view of the role of intuitions (2016: 231, 234).

intuitions reflects, of course, a widely held view about the methodology of “arm-chair philosophy” in general.³ Saul Kripke’s *Naming and Necessity*, one of the most influential works in the philosophy of language, is often, and rightly, cited as an example of heavy reliance on intuitions. And Kripke is explicit that intuitions should have this important role:

Of course, some philosophers think that something’s having intuitive content is very inconclusive evidence in favor of it. I think it is very heavy evidence in favor of anything, myself. I really don’t know, in a way, what more conclusive evidence one can have about anything, ultimately speaking. (1980: 42)

Jason Stanley and Zoltan Szabó claim that “accounting for our ordinary judgements about the truth-conditions of various sentences is the central aim of semantics” (2000a: 240).

A similar practice is also to be found in linguistics. Noam Chomsky claims that “linguistics ...is characterized by attention to certain kinds of evidence...largely, the judgments of native speakers” (1986: 36). Liliiane Haegeman, in a popular textbook, says that “all the linguist has to go by...is the native speaker’s intuitions” (1994: 8).⁴ Geoffrey Nunberg remarks: “The standard practice in both linguistics and lexicography has been to rely on intuition to distinguish conventional and non-conventional word uses” (1979: 146).

2.2 The Task?

It is clear from these claims, and other similar ones, that intuitions are commonly thought to provide *the evidence* or, at least, *the main evidence* for theories of language. Yet, often, claims of this sort seem to suggest a stronger view: *the very task* of theories of language is to explain or systematize competent speaker’s intuitions about language.

Such a view of the task is very puzzling. For, the obvious way to describe the task of the theory of language is to *explain the nature of language*, to explain properties like *meaning*, *truth*, *reference*, and *grammaticality*, real properties of linguistic symbols playing some sort of explanatory role. If we start from this view, surely as good a starting place as one could have, why take the task to be to capture *ordinary intuitions about* such properties, intuitions that must simply reflect folk theory? Nobody would suppose that the task of physics, biology, or economics was to explain folk intuitions, why should the situation be any different in linguistics and semantics?

³This view of the philosophical method does have its critics though; see Deutsch 2009 and Cappelen 2012; Devitt 2015b is a response.

⁴Despite this, linguistics, unlike the philosophy of language, does use evidence other than intuitions; see Sect. 3.6.