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WHAT MAKES A PROPERTY “SEMANTIC”?

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ABSTRACT

This paper is concerned with the semantics-pragmatics dispute. It is common to distinguish the “semantic” properties of an utterance from its “pragmatic” properties, and what is “said” from what is “meant”. What is the basis for putting something on one side rather than the other of these distinctions? Such questions are usually settled largely by appeals to intuitions. The paper rejects this approach arguing that we need a theoretical basis for these distinctions. This is to be found by noting 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 a linguistic system from, (b), any other properties that may constitute the speaker’s “message”. I call the former properties “semantic”, the latter, “pragmatic”. The semantic ones are constituted by properties arising from linguistic conventions, disambiguations, and reference fixings. I foreshadow an argument that many of the striking examples produced by linguistic pragmatists exemplify semantic rather than pragmatic properties. This argument counts against the popular pragmatist theses of “semantic underdetermination” and “truth-conditional pragmatics”. It is very much in the spirit of the tradition that pragmatists reject.

1. Introduction

Perhaps the most exciting development in recent philosophy of language has been the debate surrounding a movement that emphasizes the “pragmatic” features of language over the traditional “semantic” ones. The movement is often known as “linguistic contextualism” but I think Stephen Neale’s (2004) term for it, “linguistic pragmatism”, is more apt.¹ The movement’s seminal work is probably Dan Sperber and Deidre Wilson’s *Relevance* (1986/1995). In this paper I propose a basis for settling this “pragmatics versus semantics” dispute and foreshadow my argument to settle it on that basis.

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. Spoonerisms provide entertaining examples: thus, when Spooner *said* that a student was hissing his mystery lectures what he *meant* was that the student was missing his history lectures.²

¹ The term, and the related term “linguistic pragmatist”, are loose but convenient. In using these terms I do not mean to suggest, of course, that those in the movement agree about everything.

² I 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

Paul Grice emphasizes a distinction along these lines between “what is said” and what is “implied, suggested, meant” (1989: 24), giving many interesting examples; thus, 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 (p. 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) meanings of the expressions 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) An expression will frequently be ambiguous: more than one meaning is conventionally associated with it. If an expression is ambiguous, what is said when it is used will be partly determined by which of its meanings the speaker has in mind, by which convention she is participating in. (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 has in mind in using the term. What is it for the speaker to have *x* in mind in using the term? It is for that use to be the expression of a part of a thought that refers to *x*.³ And according to the best theory, in my view (2004: 290-5), that part of the thought refers to *x* because it is related in a certain sort of causal-perceptual way to *x*. (It follows from this, note, that the reference of the term is determined by *a mental state of the speaker*. The context external to the speaker’s mind plays a reference-determining role only to the extent that relations to that context partly constitute the mental state.)

It is taken for granted by almost all that “what is said” involves disambiguation and reference determination as well as the conventions of the language employed, as well as what is strictly encoded. The controversy is over whether anything else determined in context, and if so what else, is involved. And over whether the constitution of what is said is “semantic” or “pragmatic”. Pragmatists want to include much more into what is said and think that their enlarged what is said is partly “pragmatic”. This is their theses of “semantic underdetermination” and “truth-conditional pragmatics”.

not make much of it (p.59 n.).

³ Some prefer to say that the reference is determined by what the speaker “intends to refer to”. This can be just a harmless difference but it may not be. Having *x* in mind in using the term simply requires that the part of the thought that causes that use refers to *x*. In contrast, for a speaker *literally* to intend to refer to *x*, given that intentions are propositional attitudes, seems to require that she entertain a proposition containing the concept of *reference*. So she can’t refer without thinking about reference! This would be far too intellectualized a picture of referring. Uttering and referring are intentional actions, of course, but it seems better to avoid talking of intentions when describing them.

Pragmatists are led to their theses by a range of interesting phenomena. Here are some common examples:⁴

- (1) I've had breakfast.
- (2) You are not going to die.
- (3) It's raining.
- (4) The table is covered with books.
- (5) Everybody went to Paris.

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. According to the standard Russellian account, (4) 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. And (5) 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. Examples like these are taken to show that a deal of “pragmatic” enrichment is needed to get from what is “semantically” determined 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. 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 on our intuitions. I shall start this paper by rejecting that answer. I shall go on to propose an alternative methodology. I shall use this to motivate some terminology and distinctions, in particular a notion of *what is said*. This notion is (or is close to) the traditional one that the pragmatists oppose. I shall conclude by foreshadowing an argument for a controversial view on the substantive issue. In *Overlooking Conventions: The Trouble With Linguistic Pragmatism* (forthcoming), I argue that the linguistic pragmatists have made the wrong response to many of the striking phenomena that they have noticed. In particular, I argue that there is no interesting “semantic underdetermination” or place for “truth-conditional pragmatics”. My view is that the striking phenomena are best accommodated within a view that is in the spirit of the tradition.

2. The Role of Intuitions⁵

⁴ Taken from François Recanati, who has a helpful discussion of them (2004: 8-10). My 2013b is a critical discussion of Recanati's position on the semantics-pragmatics issue.

⁵ I draw on a fuller discussion in Devitt 2012.

As noted, the received view among linguistic pragmatists is that we should find the truth about language by consulting intuitions. Thus, 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)

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” (2000: 240). 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: intuition mongering is the *modus operandi* of the philosophy of language in general. A famous passage from Saul Kripke's *Naming and Necessity* is often cited in support:

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)

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). Liliane Haegeman, in a popular textbook, says that ‘all the linguist has to go by ... is the native speaker's intuitions’ (1994: 8).

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 expressions 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?

So let us set aside the idea that the study of linguistic intuitions is the task of theories of language and turn to the more plausible view that these intuitions are evidence for those theories.

Why do philosophers have this view of the evidential value of intuitions? One answer seems to be that the intuitions are a priori. Michael McKinsey thinks that it is “fairly clear” that “the principle that the meanings of words are knowable a priori...is taken for granted by most philosophers of language and by many linguists” (1987: 1). I think McKinsey may be right about this. If so, the situation is very regrettable. Even if one supposes that we have a priori knowledge of logic and mathematics, which I don’t think we should (1998; 2011a), it is a giant leap to suppose that we have it of meanings. I have argued that we should not take the leap (1996: 52-3; 2012).

If we don’t take the a priori leap, what else could justify the ubiquitous reliance on intuitions in the philosophy of language? Philosophers provide little in the way of an answer. As Jaakko Hintikka remarks, talking of philosophy generally: “One searches the literature in vain for a serious attempt to provide” a justification for the appeal to intuitions (1999: 130). In similar vein, Timothy Williamson remarks: “there is no agreed or even popular account of how intuition works, no accepted explanation of the hoped-for correlation between our having an intuition that P and its being true that P”. He describes this as “a methodological scandal” (2007: 215). Still, we can look to linguistics for a possible answer for *semantic* intuitions. (Perhaps we should see this answer as an explication of the obscure a priori answer.)

The common linguistic view of intuitive judgments is expressed in passages like the following:

it seems reasonably clear, both in principle and in many specific cases, how unconscious knowledge issues in conscious knowledge...it follows by computations similar to straight deduction. (Chomsky 1986: 270)

I have described the common view as follows: linguistic competence, all on its own,

provides information about the linguistic facts....So these judgments are not arrived at by the sort of empirical investigation that judgments about the world usually require. Rather, a speaker has a privileged access to facts about the language, facts captured by the intuitions, simply in virtue of being competent... (2006a: 483-4; 2006b: 96)

On this view, intuitive syntactic judgments are, “noise” aside, “the voice of competence”. Let’s call this thesis “VoC”.⁶

⁶ My attribution of VoC to linguists has been surprisingly challenged (Collins 2008a: 17-19; Fitzgerald 2010; Ludlow 2011: 69-71). I have responded (2010a: 845-7, 2013d: sec. 4).

Stephen Stich has suggested that philosophers of language might be guided by linguistics in seeking a justification for the authoritative role given to semantic intuitions (1996: 40; see also Hintikka 1999, Williamson 2007). Stich's particular concern is with referential intuitions. He suggests that philosophers may think that speakers derive their referential intuitions from a representation of referential principles. So, just as, according to VoC, the true grammar that linguists seek to discover is already represented in the mind of every speaker, so too, according to this suggestion, are true semantic theories of reference, meaning, and the like. Semantic intuitions, like syntactic ones, are the result of something like a deduction from a represented theory. Thus, speakers have "Cartesian access" to linguistic facts simply in virtue of being competent.

I have argued that VoC is highly implausible and urged instead that we should see intuitions about language, like intuitions about anything, as ordinary empirical judgments (1994; 1996; 2006a,b,c; see also Kornblith 1998).⁷ The view I have urged is, briefly, as follows:

Linguistic intuitions do not reflect information supplied by represented, or even unrepresented, rules in the language faculty. Rather, they are empirical central-processor responses to linguistic phenomena differing from other such responses only in being fairly immediate and unreflective. (2006b: 10)

Like all empirical responses, these intuitive judgments are theory-laden.⁸

On this modest view – modest because it makes do with cognitive states and processes we were already committed to – the importance of competence to intuitions is not as *a source of information* but as *a source of data*.⁹ The competent speaker has ready access to a great deal of linguistic data because she and her competent fellows produce them day in and day out. So she is surrounded by tokens that may, *as a matter of fact*, refer to so and so, be true in such and such circumstances, say that so and so, be ambiguous, and so on. So she is in a position to have well-based opinions about language by reflecting on these tokens. This is not to say that she will reflect. Indeed, a totally uneducated person may reflect very little and hence have few if any intuitive judgments about her language. Still it is clear that the normal competent speaker with even a little education *does* reflect on linguistic reality just as she reflects on many other striking aspects of the world she lives in. And this education will usually provide her with the terms and concepts of folk semantics and linguistics, at least. As a result she is likely to be able to judge in a fairly immediate and unreflective way that a token *does* refer to so and so, *is* true in such and such circumstances, *is* grammatical, *is* ambiguous, and so on. Such intuitive opinions are empirical central-

⁷ For an exchange on VoC, see Rey 2013 (sec. 3.1) and Devitt 2013d (sec. 6).

⁸ This is not to say that they are the result of *theorizing* or should count as *theoretical* (cf. Mišćević 2006: 539; Devitt 2006c: 595). They are like "observation" judgments. As such, they are theory-laden in the way we commonly think observation judgments generally are.

⁹ The sense of "data" here is the same as in "primary linguistic data". So the data provided by competence are *linguistic expressions* (and the experiences of using them) *not any observational reports* about those expressions.

processor responses to linguistic phenomena. They have no special authority: although the speaker's competence gives her ready access to data it does not give her Cartesian access to the truth about the data.

Still, are these intuitions likely to be right? I think we need to be cautious in accepting them: thinking about language is notoriously hard and the folk are a long way from being experts. Nonetheless, it does seem to me that their "simplest" intuitions, involving syntactic and semantic vocabulary that we suppose the folk have mastered well enough, are quite likely to be right. So we can often be confident about judgments that a name "refers" to *x*, that this pronoun must "refer to the same thing" as that name, and that this expression is "ambiguous". In sum, we have good reason to suppose that the core judgments of folk linguistics, reflecting the "linguistic wisdom of the ages", are good evidence for linguistic theories.

This having been said, the intuitions that philosophers and linguists should prefer are the ones that they do, as a matter of fact, mostly prefer: those of philosophers and linguists themselves. For, they are much more expert. This is particularly so when we get beyond the simple cases to fanciful ones like Kripke's Gödel (1980) and Putnam's Twin Earth (1975).¹⁰

To say that intuitions, whether those of philosophers or of the folk, are evidence is not to say that they are the only, or even the primary, evidence. Science in general does not rest on the evidence of people's intuitions, no more should the theory of language. Biology proceeds not by consulting people's intuitions about living things but rather by seeking direct evidence from living things themselves. The theory of language should proceed similarly. So, instead of relying on the indirect evidence of linguistic intuitions, the theory should seek direct, less theory-laden, evidence by studying what the intuitions are *about*, the linguistic reality itself. This reality is to be found in linguistic behavior (usage). I shall say more about this in section 3.

In sum, the received view that intuitive metalinguistic judgments should be the evidence, or at least the main evidence, in the philosophy of language should be rejected. Reliance on intuitions is a methodological flaw of linguistic pragmatism.¹¹

A general moral to be drawn from this is that the claims of any theorist about language should not be assessed simply by consulting intuitions. These intuitions reflect empirical theories, largely folk theories, that are themselves open to question. The study of language is empirical and theoretical through and through. Applying this moral to the semantics-pragmatics dispute, we should not take the traditional Gricean notion of *what is said* for granted: we need to argue that the notion is theoretically interesting and, even if it is, that our intuitions about its application are probably right. And we should make

¹⁰ I argue this in a critical discussion (2011b) of Machery *et al* 2004.

¹¹ Elsewhere (2013a) I argue that linguistic pragmatism has two other methodological flaws: confusing the metaphysics of meaning with the epistemology of interpretation; and accepting Modified Occam's Razor. I think (forthcoming) that these flaws have been significant in causing the mistaken thesis of "semantic underdetermination".

the same theoretical demands on all the notions that pragmatists have introduced; for example, Sperber and Wilson's notion of an *explicature* (1995), and many people's notions of *the proposition expressed*. We should look critically at the *theoretical motivation* for these notions. I turn now to that task.

3. The Theoretical Motivation

What theoretical point is there to the traditional distinction between what is said and what is meant? And, what theoretical point is there to the similar distinctions made by many theorists? I aim to be very careful in answering these questions because the truth of the matter about the semantics-pragmatics dispute turns on the answers.

We need to start our answers by considering why we are interested in language in the first place. Our theoretical interest in language comes from our theoretical interest in thoughts and their communication.

It is a piece of folk wisdom that people have thoughts, which is to say that they have beliefs, desires, and other such "propositional attitudes", mental states with intentional contents or meanings. So the folk are "intentional realists". I think the case for this realism is very strong (2006b: 125-7). We need to posit thoughts to people for at least two reasons: to explain people's behaviors and to explain the way they use others as a guide to a largely external reality. Thus ascribing to Mark the belief that it is raining explains both Mark's picking up an umbrella and how those present gain information about the weather (by assuming that he is reliable about such matters). We clearly have a great theoretical interest in the details of this process of explaining behavior and learning from each other.

It is a familiar piece of folk psychology that, without any involvement of language, we can sometimes use our insight into other minds and knowledge of the world to figure out what a person thinks. Thus, we might come to our view that Mark believes it is raining from observing him putting on a raincoat. And he might deliberately communicate his belief to us, without using language, by pointing upwards meaningfully as he puts on the raincoat.

We have a similar theoretical interest in the inner states of other organisms and their communication. We posit these states to explain behavior and to explain how one organism can communicate "information" to another. There is much debate in cognitive ethology and comparative psychology about these matters. There is no presumption that an organism's learning from another must involve a language. At one extreme, chemical detectors may sometimes do the job. At the other extreme, the idea is seriously entertained that this learning should sometimes be explained by attributing to an organism something like human insight into other minds.

So, we don't always have to posit languages to explain this learning. Still, scientists often do. What are they thus positing? What is a language? It is a system of representations or symbols that is constituted by a set of governing rules, and that a group

of organisms use to communicate with each other. Most such languages are not very interesting because they simply communicate information about the animal's own current state; for example, that the animal is hungry, or wants a mate. The interesting ones are the ones known as "referential", ones that convey information about the environment. The honey bee provides a famous, and very surprising, example. The bee uses a "waggle dance" to communicate the direction and distance of a food source. Gunnison's prairie dogs provide another example: they have a system of barks that convey information about which sort of predator is threatening and about the characteristics of a particular predator of that sort. Clearly, the whereabouts of food is a pressing concern for the bee, the presence and nature of a predator, for the prairie dog. A bee that has returned from a food source has reliable information about the former, a prairie dog that has observed a predator, the latter. Their languages enable them to communicate this valuable information.¹²

The rules of the bee's language are very likely entirely innate. The rules of the prairie dog's language seem to be partly learned and, perhaps we should say, "conventional": its alarm calls vary a bit from colony to colony; and when an experimenter used a plywood model to simulate a new sort of predator, the prairie dogs introduced a new call (Slobodchikoff 2002). In any case, whether a language used to communicate information is innate or conventional, we have a powerful theoretical interest in that language and its rules. Serious scientists work to discover the natures of the symbols in these representational systems, to discover their *meanings*.

Karl von Frisch is a notable example. He won a Nobel Prize for his discoveries about the bee's dance. I shall simplify by ignoring what he discovered about how the dance conveys the distance of the food source, attending only to what it conveys about direction. Von Frisch found the following remarkable rule:

To convey the direction of a food source, the bee varies the angle the wagging run makes with an imaginary line running straight up and down...If you draw a line connecting the beehive and the food source, and another line connecting the hive and the spot on the horizon just beneath the sun, the angle formed by the two lines is the same as the angle of the wagging run to the imaginary vertical line. (Frank 1997: 82)

In hypothesizing that a certain behavior in members of a species involves a symbol that represents something in their language, we are supposing that the behavior was produced *because*, in some sense, it involves that symbol representing something in their language; and it is *because* of what the symbol represents in their language that other members of the species respond to the behavior as they do. And it is because of what it represents that the symbol plays its striking role in the life of an organism.

¹² And it is worth noting that sometimes we are confident that an animal has a language because we have *taught* it one; think of some dolphins and primates that have been taught surprisingly complex languages.

Evidence for such hypotheses is to be found, of course, in regularities in behavior. Thus, von Frisch's hypothesis was offered as an explanation of his many painstaking observations of the bee's behavior. But is it the *best* explanation? For some time it was not obvious that it was. A rival hypothesis was that a bee heading off in the direction of the food source was not responding to information communicated by a bee's dance but rather was following an odor trail left by other bees. But this rival did not stand up to ingenious experiments. The consensus is now that the hypothesis that the bee is using the language described by von Frisch is indeed the best explanation of the bee's behavior (Dyer 2002; Riley *et al* 2005; Vladusich *et al* 2006).¹³

Return to humans. It is a truism that they have languages which they use to communicate "messages": as the folk say, "language expresses thought". This idea seems irresistible once one has accepted intentional realism, accepted that humans have thoughts (2006b: 127-8). As Fodor, Bever, and Garrett say, "there is much to be said for the old-fashioned view that speech expresses thought, and very little to be said against it" (1974: 375). So, just as the bees and the prairie dogs have representational systems used to communicate the contents of inner states to each other, so do we.¹⁴ The evidence for this in our behavior seems overwhelming.¹⁵

Consider again our example of Mark and the ascription to him of the belief that it is raining. Suppose that the people present ascribe this belief on the basis of his production of the sound, /It is raining/. According to the rules of English, this sound means that it is raining (ignoring here, for convenience, pragmatists' worries about the "underdetermination" of such weather reports). If the people assume that Mark is being literal and straightforward, they will take that meaning to be the message the speaker intentionally communicates, his "speaker meaning". As a result, they have evidence of his thoughts. Taking him to be sincere in his expression, they conclude that he has a belief with that meaning (content), the belief that it is raining. In this way, language is an extraordinarily effective way of making the thoughts of others accessible to us, thoughts that otherwise would be largely inaccessible; and of making our thoughts accessible to others, often in the hope of changing their thoughts and hence their behavior. Even though, as we noted, the thoughts of others are sometimes accessible to us without language, they mostly are not.

¹³ For more on this issue see Devitt 2006c (pp. 585-6) responding to Smith 2006 (p. 440-1).

¹⁴ Language is used for purposes other than communication: to muse, to make notes, to try out a line for a poem, and so on. Communication is the most striking use of language but, contrary to "intention-based semantics", it is not essential to language. What is essential to (human) language is the expression of thought.

¹⁵ Nonetheless, this view of language is rejected by Chomskians. They see a human language as an internal state not a system of external symbols that represent the world. I argue that this is deeply misguided (2006a: chs 2 and 10; 2006c; 2008a,b).

Just as we have a powerful theoretical interest in the languages of bees and prairie dogs, we have one in human languages and their rules: we need to know about the natures of the representations used to communicate in these systems.¹⁶

The rules of human languages are largely conventional.¹⁷ Indeed, it is a truism that expressions in a language (like English) have their meanings by convention. As David Lewis points out at the beginning of his classic, *Convention*, it is a “platitude that language is ruled by convention” (1969: 1). Where do these conventions come from? On rare occasions they are established by some influential people stipulating that a certain form has a certain meaning. However, following Grice (1989) and Stephen Schiffer (1972), I think that the conventions associated with a linguistic form – a sound, an inscription, etc. - in a community typically come from the regular use in the community of that form to convey certain parts of messages. That regular use of it in utterances with a certain speaker meaning, leads, somehow or other, to that form having that meaning conventionally in the language of that community.

This being so, we find evidence of linguistic conventions, hence evidence of the rules that constitute a human language, in such regularities in behavior. We should posit a conventional rule for a human language, just as we posit an innate rule for the bee’s, if it provides the best explanation of the observed behavior.

I said earlier (sec. 2) that the primary evidence for our theories of language should not be the indirect evidence of intuitions but rather the direct evidence provided by linguistic reality itself. The regularities in linguistic behavior, or usage, that provide evidence of linguistic conventions are to be found in this reality. How are we to gather this evidence? I have urged elsewhere (2011b, 2011c) that it be gathered by the informal observation, and the scientific study, of the corpus of the language. Furthermore, it can be gathered using “the technique of elicited production”: we can conduct experiments in which situations are constructed or described and people are prompted to see what they say and understand in those situations.

Conventions should loom very large in our view of human language in general¹⁸ and in our response to linguistic pragmatism in particular. What can be said about them? I have just talked of regularities in usage causing conventions and providing evidence for them.

¹⁶ Some philosophers and linguists, impressed by the great difference between a human language and the representational systems of other animals, resist calling those systems “languages”. I can see no theoretical point to this resistance. In any case, the point is merely verbal.

¹⁷ I say “largely” because I do not reject the Chomskian view that some syntax is innate. The qualification should be taken as read in future.

¹⁸ In stark contrast, Chomsky thinks that the “regularities in usage” needed for linguistic conventions “are few and scattered” (1996: 47; see also 1980: 81-3). Furthermore, such conventions as there are do not have “any interesting bearing on the theory of meaning or knowledge of language” (1996: 48). I think these views are very mistaken (2006b: 178–89; see also 2006c: 581-2, 598-605; 2008a: 217-29).

This is not to say that the regularities constitute conventions. Since linguistic conventions can be created by stipulation and agreement, there can be conventions without regularities. And there can be regularities without conventions, regularities that are best explained otherwise. So, what then is a linguistic convention and what is it to participate in one? Lewis (1969) and Schiffer (1972) have a lot to say about this, of course, but their accounts, particularly requirements of “common knowledge” (Lewis) or “mutual knowledge*” (Schiffer), seem too intellectualized.¹⁹ And this appearance is reinforced by the thought that we probably have to see the behavior of some nonhuman animals as conventional; see above on the prairie dogs. We seek a less intellectualized view.

Where there is a linguistic convention for an expression in a community, members of that community share a communicative disposition to associate the expression with a certain speaker meaning, a certain part of messages. But this sharing is not enough. The sharing has to be partly explained by appropriate causal relations between the speakers’ communicative dispositions as Lewis and Schiffer made clear. If we back away from intellectualized accounts it is, of course, hard to say precisely what causal relations are needed. Still, the center of what has to be said is that any speaker has her disposition *because other speakers have theirs*; there is a certain sort of dependency of the disposition of each member of the community on the dispositions of others. And for a person to participate in this convention is for her to act on such a dependent disposition.

This account does not go nearly as far as one would like. How concerned should we be about that? Not very, in my view.²⁰ We may lack a satisfactory complete account of conventions but what we do have does not leave conventions in any way mysterious. And we *need* a notion of convention to explain much human behavior including, as just noted, human linguistic communication. So even though not fully explained, the notion is much needed and not mysterious. Science is full of such notions. Indeed, it *must* be since, as they say, at any time “explanations must stop somewhere”.

Return to the bee’s language. Our theoretical interest is not simply in the rules of this language, discovered by von Frisch, but in the representational properties of any *particular* dance that is governed by those rules. For, it is in virtue of the dance having those properties that it plays its striking role in the lives of the bees that are present: it is because the dance has those properties that the one bee produces it and the other bees respond to it with certain flight behaviors. *And the dance does not get all its explanatory representational properties, all its meaning, simply from the rules of the bee’s language.* Thus, a dance at a certain angle to the vertical represents a particular direction of the food

¹⁹ Stephen Laurence (1996, 1998) rejects “convention-based semantics” largely on the basis of criticisms of Lewis’ account of conventions in general and of linguistic conventions in particular. These criticisms are partly of the highly intellectualized nature of Lewis’ account. I sympathize with those criticisms. I reject the rest (2006b: 180).

²⁰ John Collins thinks otherwise. He criticizes my previous discussions along these lines by claiming that “the relevant notion of convention remains wholly opaque” (2008b: 245; see also 2008a: 35) and hence, by implication, unacceptable. I have responded (2008b).

source *only partly* in virtue of being governed by the rule described above, *only partly* in virtue of what is encoded. The dance represents that direction also partly in virtue of the actual direction of the spot on the horizon beneath the sun from the beehive at the time of the dance. Those two factors constitute the message about direction that the dance communicates; they constitute “what the bee says” by that particular dance “utterance”. And it is important to note that the second factor, part of what constitutes the representational property or meaning that we are theoretically interested in, is provided “in the context of utterance”. The linguistic rule “demands” that this contextual “saturation”²¹ be taken into account in constituting the property that interests us; it demands that the “slot” for the direction of the spot on the horizon be filled.

Similarly with human languages, the linguistic rules for any word with an indexical or demonstrative element demand saturation in the context. These rules differ from those of the bees in being conventional not innate, but that is beside the point. Thus, suppose that I am right in my earlier claim that, according to a linguistic rule, a token of the demonstrative ‘that’ refers to whatever object is linked to it in the appropriate causal-perceptual way. So that rule captures the convention for expressing the demonstrative part of a thought, the convention for expressing that particular sort of meaning in an utterance. It is simply in virtue of being governed by that rule that a demonstrative has its encoded meaning. A consequence is that any token that is governed by this rule has its representational property partly in virtue of the object that is as a matter of fact linked to it in that causal-perceptual way. So it has that property partly in virtue of something that is not encoded. Just as with the bee, a linguistic rule “demands” a certain contextual saturation in constituting the property of theoretical interest, the representational property that plays a striking role in the lives of the humans that are present. It because of what the demonstrative refers to as a result of saturation that a speaker produces it and that hearers respond to it with behaviors that are likely to involve, in some way, the object of reference.

We have earlier noted (sec. 1) that what is said by a human utterance, according to the tradition, is often partly constituted by whatever determines the reference of indexical or demonstrative elements. We have just seen the theoretical need for a notion with this property. The tradition has got it right here.

We have earlier noted also that, where an expression is ambiguous in the language employed by the speaker then, according to the tradition, the constitution of what is said takes account of which of the expression’s meanings the speaker has in mind: it takes account of the speaker’s “disambiguation” of the expression. This contribution to what is said is also motivated by our interest in the representational properties or meanings that play the striking role. Ambiguity arises when more than one linguistic rule governs a symbol. With human languages, this multiplicity arises from multiple conventions for the symbol; the symbol encodes more than one meaning in the language.²² The multiplicity

²¹ ‘Saturation’ is Recanati’s neat term for what is similarly demanded by a human language (2004: 7).

²² Multiplicity could, in principle, arise from multiple innate rules for a symbol but, so far

demands disambiguation to arrive at the representational properties that are of theoretical interest. Thus, we are interested in *which* of the conventionally possible representational properties or meanings of ‘bank’ is actually instantiated in a particular utterance of ‘I went to a bank’; we are interested in *which* of the two conventions for ‘bank’ the speaker is participating in. A language is constituted by a system of linguistic rules. It is because speakers exploit those rules that the language is such an effective device for communicating with those who share the language. The explanatory role of a particular symbol depends on which rule has been exploited. The tradition is right again.

So, our theoretical interest in the representational properties that an utterance has simply in virtue of the speaker’s exploitation of a language motivates an interest in three sorts of properties. (i) Our interest starts with encoded properties, ones that the utterance has solely as a result of the conventional linguistic rules of the language, rules for using certain physical forms to express certain parts of thought contents. But we are interested also in two other sorts of properties. (ii) Where a symbol in an utterance is ambiguous and so covered by more than one linguistic rule, we have an interest in which meaning the speaker has in mind, hence which rule is in fact governing the symbol in this utterance. (iii) Where a symbol is governed by a rule that demands saturation – for example, an indexical, tense, or demonstrative - we are interested in the results of that saturation. I call any property, like (i) to (iii), that is simply a language-exploiting representational property of an utterance part of “what is said”, thus staying close to the tradition. Waiving my usual resistance to talk of propositions (1996: 210-15), I also sometimes call what is said, “the proposition said”.²³

Does any sort of property of an utterance other than (i) to (iii) go into what is said? Does our interest in language-exploiting representational properties motivate an interest in any other sort? I know of no reason for supposing so and will assume not.

My notion of *what is said* is (or is close to) the traditional one that the linguistic pragmatists oppose. The usual case for this notion rests on appeals to intuitions. I certainly think that the notion is intuitively appealing, but that is not my case for it. I claim to have provided a theoretical motivation for the notion.

In *Overlooking Conventions* (forthcoming), I go further in the spirit of the tradition by arguing, controversially, that much of the pragmatist phenomena fall under this notion of what is said. I shall say a bit more about this argument in section 6.

So, we have theoretically motivated a notion of *what is said* by an utterance. We have earlier motivated the familiar talk of “thoughts” and have identified the “message” of an utterance as the thought that the speaker intentionally conveys, what the speaker means by the utterance.²⁴ Waiving my resistance again, we could also call this, “the

as I know, there is no example of this in nature.

²³ This needs qualification because what is said using a sub-sentential is sometimes only a fragment of a proposition (forthcoming).

²⁴ A speaker might intend to convey more than one message. I am simplifying by setting

proposition meant”. Earlier examples (sec. 1) from Spooner and Grice show vividly that what is meant can differ dramatically from what is said. Spooner said that a student was hissing his mystery lectures and the philosopher said that a student’s English is excellent and his attendance regular: those, respectively, are the properties that these utterances have simply in virtue of the speaker’s exploitation, in the context, of the conventional linguistic rules of the language. Yet what Spooner meant, the message he intended to convey, was that the student was missing his history lectures. Similarly, the philosopher, and the message that the student was no good at philosophy.²⁵

If the linguistic form used by a speaker to convey a thought expresses that thought according to the conventions of the language, then the message will be what is said. If not, the message might be quite different from what is said, as Grice’s example illustrates. Something important follows from that possible difference: the fact that *p* is *what is said* by an utterance does not entail that *p* is *meant* by the utterance (does not entail that *p* is the utterance’s *message*). This is a consequence of the notions of saying and meaning that I claim to have theoretically motivated. In contrast, many theorists have notions of saying and meaning that have the consequence that saying that *p* entails meaning that *p*. I can see no theoretical motivation for this.²⁶

Grice calls the message conveyed in his example a “conversational implicature”. There are other ways in which what is meant can depart from what is said, what I call “pragmatic enrichments” and “pragmatic impoverishments”.

The notions of what is said and what is meant that I have explained are at the absolute center of my response to linguistic pragmatism.

4. Terminology

The naming of what is said raises the vexed matter of terminology. We need to address this matter thoroughly to avoid merely verbal disputes. In addressing it, we should introduce terms only for notions that have been theoretically motivated. And, given the confusing array of terminology already in the debate, we should try to stay as

this possibility aside.

²⁵ I am ignoring, for convenience, the distinction between sayings that are statings or assertions and sayings that are mere rehearsings. It is convenient to ignore this because whether the saying is a stating or a rehearsing, its language-exploiting content is the same.

²⁶ Of course, it would not be the case that a certain proposition was said by an utterance, any more than it would be the case that a certain proposition was meant by it, were it not for the fact that the speaker intentionally produced that utterance. So we might ordinarily say that the speaker “meant” both propositions. But this ordinary way of speaking does not provide a theoretical motivation for treating the distinct items, what is said and the message, as parts of the one “meaning”. (There is a subtle issue about the relation of the intentional act of uttering to what is said; see Devitt 2013c: note 15 and accompanying text.)

close as possible to familiar uses of familiar terms. I take it that my uses of ‘what is said’ and ‘the proposition said’, and ‘the message’ and ‘the proposition meant’, meet these criteria. But how should we use ‘semantic(s)’ and ‘pragmatic(s)’?

Many philosophers favor a narrow use of ‘semantics’ according to which it refers to the study of only the conventional linguistic rules of a language, rules that determine what is encoded in the language. Related to this, these philosophers take ‘semantic property’ to refer only to those properties of expression *types* fully determined by those linguistic rules, properties “known” by every competent speaker of the language. There can be no objection to this usage. Our theoretical interest in what is said by an utterance (in the sense just explained) motivates an interest in any property that constitutes what is said. And our discussion has shown that properties determined by linguistic rules constitute a large part of what is said. So we have a strong motivation for identifying and naming those properties and their study. Indeed, von Frisch won a Nobel as a result of his interest in the rules of the bee’s dance. However, we also need a term for the study of what is said itself. And we need a term for *all* the properties that constitute it, properties of types (i) to (iii), not just for the ones determined by the rules of the language, properties of type (i). ‘Semantics’ and ‘semantic’ seem, respectively, ideal for these jobs too. Semantics in this wide sense includes semantics in the narrow sense because the conventional properties of an expression type are among the ones that constitute what is said by any particular use of that type in an utterance.

Kent Bach is one who favors the narrow uses of ‘semantics’ and ‘semantic’ and rather deplors their wide uses “for features pertaining to truth and reference” (1994: 133 n. 9).²⁷ Nathan Salmon is another, and launches a polemic against “the speech-act centered conception” which takes “semantics as concerned with what a speaker *says* or *asserts* in uttering a declarative sentence” (2005: 321). In response, I emphasize first that this *is* only a verbal matter and hence not worthy of much passion.²⁸ Second, there is a custom, as both Bach and Salmon acknowledge, of using these terms widely. Third, this wide use relates the semantics of language nicely to what Jerry Fodor has neatly called “psychosemantics” (1987), the study of thought meanings (contents). For those meanings are truth-referential. In any case, I use the terms widely unless they are accompanied by the qualification ‘narrow’.

I call the *properties* that constitute what is said, “semantic”. So it is appropriate to also call “semantic” the *processes* in a speaker that are responsible for utterances having

²⁷ My 2013c is a detailed discussion of Bach’s position on the semantics-pragmatics issue. I argue that his notion of “what is said” is not theoretically motivated and that his methodology for deciding what counts as “semantic” (in his sense) is faulty, which has the conservative effect of keeping out new meanings.

²⁸ Salmon is used to hearing this response and is not impressed: “‘It’s all just terminology’ is the last refuge of the speech-act centered conception” (2005: 327). Kapa Korta and John Perry’s view (2007: 98-9) that “something has gone awry” in Cappelen and Lepore’s account of “semantic minimalism” (2005: 143-5) seems to rest simply on an insistence that ‘semantics’ be used narrowly.

those semantic properties, processes of convention participation and reference fixing. However, there seems to be little occasion to do so.

Finally, we must turn to the *really* vexed matter of ‘pragmatics’ and ‘pragmatic’. These terms have distressingly many uses in the literature, as Bach nicely demonstrates (1999). One common way to use ‘pragmatics’ is for the study of communication or, as it is usually called, “interpretation”, the study of the way that a hearer comes to understand the message conveyed by a speaker’s utterance: “the goal of pragmatics is to explain how the hearer’s task...can be carried out” (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 179; see also: 10). And the processes that are thus studied are called ‘pragmatic’. I go along with this usage. And I take it that the terms so used also cover processes in the speaker of choosing among ways to communicate a message.

A word of warning about “interpretation”. Like many English nouns this one is ambiguous between a process and a product. So it can refer to the process of interpreting the meaning of an utterance or it can refer to the meaning assigned by that process. In calling the theory of interpretation “pragmatics”, as I have just done, I am taking it to be concerned with the process of interpreting. If we took it to be concerned with the meaning assigned by the process then it would be akin to semantics, a very different matter.²⁹ Because of this ambiguity, I do not talk of the theory or study “of interpretation”.

So we have defined a use of ‘pragmatic’ to describe certain processes, the ones involved in interpreting communications. And we have defined a use of ‘pragmatics’ to describe the study of those processes. Understood in this way, pragmatics and what is pragmatic are *obviously* very different from semantics and what is semantic: pragmatics is about certain *processes* (mostly) in a hearer, semantics is about certain *properties* of an utterance. Of course, those semantic properties play a big role in the pragmatic processes: the hearer’s grasp of what is said is a key part, at least, of her process of figuring out the message communicated (sec. 5). Still, understood in this way, there is no way in which semantics and pragmatics are *rivals*. What then are we to make of the pragmatics versus semantics dispute?

The answer is that it is common to use ‘pragmatic’ also to describe *properties of an utterance that are not semantic*, in some preferred sense, and yet contribute to a message conveyed; for example, Gricean implicatures and certain enrichments and impoverishments. And it is common to use ‘pragmatics’ also to describe the study of these nonsemantic properties. So, understood in this way, “pragmatics” and “semantics” offer different accounts of the properties of utterances and *are* rivals of some sort (see, for example, Bach 1999; Carston 2007). It is only when ‘pragmatics’ is understood in this way that the dispute over where to draw the line between pragmatics and semantics is intelligible. For want of better terms, I shall reluctantly go along with this common usage, with “nonsemantic” understood in my sense, of course.

²⁹ Stephen Neale’s “theory of interpretation” seems to cover both processes and products (2004: 71-90).

So ‘pragmatics’, as commonly used and as used by me, is ambiguous, referring sometimes to the study of communication and sometimes to the study of these pragmatic properties of utterances. This ambiguity does not get the attention it deserves.³⁰

Many use ‘pragmatic’ to describe more properties of an utterance than the ones that are nonsemantic in my sense: it is used to describe all the properties of what is said other than conventional properties of expression types, other than encoded *narrow*-semantic properties (e.g., Sperber and Wilson 1995: 36, 217; Recanati 2004: 8; Carston 2007). Using the term in this way to describe what we might call “wide-pragmatic” properties is unfortunate because it conceals the theoretically crucial distinction between the nonconventional properties of an utterance that constitute what is said and those that constitute what is meant *but not said*. For the former properties, but not the latter, are the ones the utterance has simply in virtue of the speaker’s exploitation of her language. They are ones that make the utterance an instance of her linguistic system just as, in the case of a bee’s dance, its property of representing the direction of the food source, a property it has partly in virtue of the actual direction from the beehive of the spot on the horizon beneath the sun, makes the dance an instance of the bee’s linguistic system. So, in my usage, pragmatic properties are not part of what is said.

It is important to note that although some properties of an utterance may be pragmatic in one sense, *all* the hearer’s processes of understanding the utterance’s message are pragmatic in the other sense, whether they involve grasping pragmatic properties or semantic properties (what is said). And all of these processes are studied by pragmatics as the theory of communication (and none of them by pragmatics as the theory of pragmatic properties).

5. Communication

It has always been clear that we can use our insight into other minds to successfully convey messages without using language; Mark’s pointing upwards meaningfully as he puts on the raincoat is an example. And Grice gave us vivid examples of our using our insight into other minds, *together with what is said*, to successfully convey messages that differ from what is said; thus, the philosopher conveyed the message that the student was not good at philosophy without using any conventional form for expressing that thought and by saying something entirely different. In these cases the message conveyed is not the representational property of the symbol produced but something that the speaker supposes that the hearer can infer in part from her awareness of that property.

Where communication involves a language, the representational properties of symbols in the language should certainly be center stage in a theory of communication among the organisms. For, it is largely, even if not entirely, because symbols of the

³⁰ This is presumably related somehow to the confusion of the metaphysics of meaning with the epistemology of interpretation that I discuss elsewhere (2013a).

language have those properties, and because the organisms have the capacity to exploit those properties in sending and receiving messages, that communication occurs.³¹ So pragmatics, as the theory of communication, must start with what Stanley and Szabó call the “descriptive” problem of semantics, the assigning of “semantic values” to expressions of the language in question (2000: 223). (They contrast the descriptive problem with the “foundational” one concerned with in virtue of what expressions have those values.). But the theory of communications requires much more than this description of the representational properties of the symbols in that language.

Consider communication among the bees, for example. We start with the theory of their language provided by von Frisch, together with the obvious fact that the bees are competent in that language. But then we need to know how bees can use that competence to send and receive particular messages. How does a sender bee use its competence to turn its “knowledge” of the direction of the food and of the direction of the spot on the horizon beneath the sun into a dance at an angle that, according to the rules of its language, conveys the direction of the food? How does a receiver bee use its competence to turn its “knowledge” of that angle and of the direction of the spot on the horizon into the message about where the food is? We know sadly little of the answers.

The point is even more striking with communication among humans, of course. For this communication involves not only features analogous to those in bee communication but also disambiguations, pragmatic enrichments and impoverishments, and implicatures, so admirably demonstrated by the pragmatists. But, to emphasize, pragmatics, as the theory of this communication, starts with the semantics of the language, with what is said, but goes much further. And whereas the focus of the semantics is on the speaker because the speaker determines both what is said and the message, the focus of pragmatics is on the hearer because the task of receiving a message is more difficult than the task of sending one.

6. The Semantics-Pragmatics Dispute

My methodology for tackling the semantics-pragmatics dispute starts from the view that a language is a representational system posited to explain communication.³² From this start I provide a theoretical motivation for a sharp distinction between two sorts of properties of an utterance. On the one hand there are its (wide-)semantic properties. These are properties that an utterance has simply in virtue of the speaker’s exploitation of the conventional rules of her language. They include, but are not limited to, an utterance’s encoded narrow-semantic properties, ones that are fully determined by the rules governing the symbol type of which the utterance’s symbol is a token. Semantic properties constitute what is said, the proposition said. On the other hand, there are the utterance’s other properties which, perhaps along with semantic ones, contribute to the

³¹ See Pagin and Pelletier (2007: 35) for a nice statement of this sort of view.

³² And to explain some non-communicative uses of language; see note 14.

message conveyed, the proposition meant. These are the utterance's pragmatic properties.³³

From my perspective, semantics is concerned with the representational properties that symbols have in virtue of being uses of a language, the properties that constitute what is said. These properties contribute to conveying the message of an utterance. Other factors may also contribute to conveying the message but these are not the concern of semantics. So the key issue for the semantics-pragmatics dispute is the nature of those linguistic representational properties. The symbols have those properties largely in virtue of being part of a representational system of conventional rules. So the key issue comes down to: What are the conventions that constitute the system?

How do we answer this key question? As noted in section 3, we look for evidence from regularities in behavior (usage). Is this expression regularly used to express a certain speaker meaning? If so, is this regularity best explained by supposing that there is a convention of so using the expression? We take properties to be semantic if that is the best explanation of regularities in behavior.

In section 3, I argued that what is said is constituted by three sorts of properties: briefly, those arising from (i) convention, (ii) disambiguation, and (iii) saturation. And I assumed that what is said is constituted by no other sorts of properties. This view of what is said by an utterance is part of the traditional view that is rejected by the linguistic pragmatists. Another part of that view, implicitly at least, is that what is thus said is, with perhaps the occasional exception, the literal truth condition (meaning, content) of the utterance: what is said in that sense is standardly the message conveyed. The pragmatists have mounted a formidable challenge to this view. They use a range of striking examples, illustrated by utterances (1) to (5) in section 1, to argue that the literal truth conditions of utterances are mostly, if not always, underdetermined by properties (i) to (iii); the truth conditions are "semantically underdetermined"; a new theoretical framework is called for. In *Overlooking Conventions* (forthcoming) I confront this challenge by arguing, controversially, that many of the pragmatists' examples exemplify properties of sorts (i) to (iii). There are more of such properties than we have previously noted: much more of the content of messages should be put into the convention-governed what is said – into semantics - than has been customary. The pragmatists have made the wrong response to their examples. So I am urging a view that is very much in the spirit of the tradition. No new framework is called for.

The argument for this view requires, of course, a discussion of the striking examples. This cannot be attempted here. However I shall summarize one such discussion that is already published, my discussion of definite descriptions (1981; 1997a,b; 2004; 2008c,d).

³³ As Manuel García-Carpintero says: "the semantics/pragmatics divide is in my view ultimately about which meaning-properties are constitutive of natural languages and which are not" (2005: 43).

Utterances containing referential uses of descriptions, like the example in section 1,

(4) The table is covered with books,

are among the pragmatists' favorite examples of a pragmatically enriched what is said. Pragmatists from Grice onwards have denied that these uses of descriptions should be explained semantically by taking descriptions to have a referential meaning as well as the generally accepted Russellian quantificational meaning. Instead, pragmatists tend to think that referential uses are best explained pragmatically as conversational implicatures (or something similar). I have presented a number of reasons for thinking that such pragmatic explanations are wrong. The most important is "The Argument from Convention".³⁴ 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. Furthermore, there is no good pragmatic explanation of this regularity. The best explanation is a semantic one: there is a convention of using descriptions referentially.³⁵

Definite descriptions illustrate previously unnoticed semantic properties of all three sorts. Concerning (i), a referential use of a description exemplifies an overlooked referential convention. Concerning (ii), since there is also a quantificational convention for descriptions, what is said when a description is used referentially is partly constituted by disambiguation. Concerning (iii), the convention for referential descriptions demands saturation in the context.

The view of the semantics-pragmatics issue that I am urging, in the spirit of the tradition, goes against pragmatist theses of "semantic underdetermination" and "truth-conditional pragmatics". We all accept, of course, that semantic conventions do not alone determine what is said, do not alone determine truth-conditional content: disambiguation and saturation are also required. But pragmatists think that there is much more semantic underdetermination than this. Relatedly, many urge truth-conditional pragmatics. According to that thesis, the meaning of the sentence in an utterance does not alone yield a truth-conditional content (even after disambiguation and reference fixing); it needs to be pragmatically supplemented and can be so in indefinitely many ways yielding indefinitely many truth conditions.³⁶ A consequence of my view is that there are no interesting theses of semantic underdetermination and truth-conditional pragmatics.³⁷ Semantic properties alone constitute the theoretically interesting notion of what is said.

³⁴ This is Neale's apt name for the argument (2004: 71). The Argument from Convention is also to be found in Reimer 1998.

³⁵ In my view, Felipe Amaral (2008) has driven the final nail into the coffin of the received Russellian view of descriptions with his discussion of "Kripke's Test".

³⁶ Bezuidenhout 2002; Recanati 2003, 2004; Searle 1980; Travis 1996, 1997, 2006.

³⁷ Truth-conditional pragmatics has a further problem, I argue (2013b): it cannot explain how the conventionally constituted property of a sentence in an utterance constrains a

7. Conclusion

How should we discover the truth about language? The paper rejects the received answer that we should do so by consulting our intuitions about language. Those intuitions reflect empirical theories, largely folk theories, that are themselves open to question. In answering the question, we should start by consider what a language is and why we sometimes suppose that organisms have one. A language is a representational system posited to explain communication. This gives a powerful theoretical interest in the natures of the representations yielded by this system. For human languages, I argue, these natures are constituted by three sorts of properties, briefly, those arising from convention, disambiguation, and saturation: these three sorts of properties constitute “what is said” by an utterance, “the proposition said”. This amounts to a theoretical motivation for a fairly traditional Gricean notion of *what is said*.

Evidence of the properties that constitute what is said is to be found in behavior. In particular, the regular use of an expression with a certain speaker meaning provides evidence of a convention of so using it and hence of what makes up the language.

The theoretical motivation provides a sharp distinction between two sorts of properties of a linguistic utterance: its “semantic” properties which constitute what is said and the proposition said; its other, “pragmatic”, properties which, perhaps along with semantic ones, contribute to “the message” conveyed, “the proposition meant”.

The “semantic” theory of the representational properties of symbols in a language is one thing, the “pragmatic” theory of communication among users of that language, another. Yet the semantic theory should be center stage for the pragmatic one. For, it is largely, even if not entirely, because symbols of the language have those “semantic” properties, and because the organisms have the capacity to exploit those properties in sending and receiving messages, that communication occurs. And whereas the focus of the semantic theory is on the speaker because the speaker determines both what is said and the message, the focus of pragmatic theory is on the hearer because the task of receiving a message is more difficult than the task of sending one.

Implicitly at least, the traditional view is that what is said by an utterance, in something like the sense I have motivated, is standardly the literal truth-conditional content communicated. I have foreshadowed an argument that confronts the challenge that the linguistic pragmatists have posed to this view. The argument is that many of the pragmatists’ striking examples exemplify properties arising from convention, disambiguation, and saturation and so go into constituting my semantic what is said. This counts against the popular pragmatist theses of “semantic underdetermination” and

truth conditional content without determining one; nor how the property could allow indefinitely many truth conditions.

“truth-conditional pragmatics”. And it is very much in the spirit of the tradition that pragmatists reject.³⁸

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³⁸ The first version of this paper, under the title, “Pragmatics versus Semantics”, was delivered at an International Conference, “Meaning”, University of Erfurt (Germany), in September 2009. Later versions, sometimes under the title “Linguistic Pragmatism”, were delivered at many universities. I am grateful for comments at these talks.

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