

CHAPTER 12

INTENTION-BASED SEMANTICS

EMMA BORG

THERE is a sense in which it is trivial to say that one accepts intention-(or convention-) based semantics.¹ For if what is meant by this claim is simply that there is an important respect in which words and sentences have meaning (either at all or the particular meanings that they have in any given natural language) due to the fact that they are used, in the way they are, by intentional agents (i.e. speakers), then it seems no one should disagree. For imagine a possible world where there are physical things which share the shape and form of words of English or Japanese, or the acoustic properties of sentences of Finnish or Arapaho, yet where there are no intentional agents (or where any remaining intentional agents don't use language). In such a world, it seems clear that these physical objects, which are only superficially language-like, will lack all meaning. Furthermore, it seems that questions of particular meaning are also settled by the conventions of intentional language users: it's nothing more than convention which makes the concatenation of letters 'a' 'p' 'p' 'l' 'e' mean *apple*, rather than *banana*, in English.² So, understood as the minimal claim that intentional agents, with a practice of using certain physical objects (written words, sounds, hand gestures, etc.) to communicate certain thoughts, are a *prerequisite* for linguistic meaning, the idea that semantics is based on both intention and convention seems indisputable. I will label a theory which

¹ Intention-based semantics (IBS), as practised by, say, Grice, is a different project from convention-based semantics as practised by, say, Lewis. However, the two projects are often thought to be intimately connected, with convention providing a key component in IBS accounts of sentence, as opposed to speaker, meaning (see Schiffer, 1972, and next section).

² This platitudinous sense of a dependence on convention is stressed at the outset by Lewis, 1969: 1-2.

recognizes this preconditional role for speaker intentions an A-style intention-based semantics and we will explore one such account in Section 12.1.³

This relatively trivial form of appeal to speaker intentions in determining semantic content can, however, be distinguished from a more pervasive form of appeal. On this picture, intentional agents are not only a prerequisite for linguistic meaning, they also play a fundamental role in determining the semantic content of an expression in a current communicative exchange. In this way, the route to grasp of meaning must go via a consideration of a current speaker's state of mind. I will label any theory which assigns this more substantive role to speaker intentions a B-style intention-based semantics and we will look at one form such a theory might take in Section 12.2. Then, in Section 12.3, I want to highlight three points of difference between A-style and B-style theories and suggest, in Section 12.4, that it is the characteristics of A-style intention-based semantics which appear better suited to providing a semantic theory for natural language.

12.1 A-STYLE INTENTION-BASED SEMANTICS (A-STYLE IBS)

The intention-based semantics (IBS) story really starts with the work of Paul Grice. In a number of seminal papers, Grice put forward an account which aimed to show that all semantic notions attaching to a public language could be reduced to psychological notions.⁴ Grice's idea was to show how claims about sentence meaning could be explicated in terms of speaker-meaning, and then show how speaker-meaning could be understood purely in terms of (non-semantic) speaker intentions. These moves, if successful, would reveal linguistic meaning as posing no further problems than the more fundamental notion of mental content.⁵ Furthermore, if the reductive IBS programme were twined with a reductive, naturalistic account of intentionality, then we would have an account which successfully showed us how to find a place for linguistic meaning in the ordinary, physical, scheme of things. It would show us how the meanings of our words and phrases can be explained, ultimately, by appeal to physical facts alone.

A key notion in Grice's account is, then, that of utterer's meaning—the idea that *by uttering some linguistic item x, a speaker, U, meant that p*. This notion of utterer's

³ I introduce the labels 'A-style' and 'B-style' in order to abstract from exegetical questions concerning which theorists hold which position. Such exegetical issues will be touched on, but certainly not settled, below.

⁴ Grice, 1989: Essay 5, 91. This claim that the Gricean project is reductive in nature has been questioned by some, cf. Avramides, 1989: ch.1.

⁵ We might note that Fodor, 1989: 423 also endorses IBS: "[W]e don't know how IBS *could* be true. But IBS is the metaphysics we require to explain how there could be intentional laws; and it's the metaphysics that the computational theory of the mind presupposes. So we know IBS *must* be true. So we know that IBS *is* true."

meaning is explained via the speaker's intentions: an agent means something by a given act only if she intends that act to produce some effect in an audience, at least partly by means of the audience's recognition of that intention. It is for this reason that we might think of the intentions in question as reflexive or self-referential: they are intentions which are satisfied when they themselves are recognized.⁶ This gives us the form of analysis for utterer's, or speaker's, meaning, which forms the heart of Gricean IBS:

(UM) U utterer-means that p by x iff for some audience A, U intends that:

- (i) by uttering x, U induce the belief that (U believes that) p in A
- (ii) A should recognize (i)
- (iii) A's recognition of (i) should be the reason for A's forming the belief that (U believes that) p.⁷

One point we should clarify with respect to the Gricean programme is the status of at least some of these deliveries of utterer's meaning as genuinely *semantic*, for one of the primary distinctions contemporary philosophy of language has borrowed from Grice is the distinction between sentence meaning and utterer's meaning, and the view that while the former is the proper subject of semantics, the latter is the proper subject of pragmatics. So we could be misled into thinking that UM only offers an analysis of pragmatic, not semantic, content.

Grice himself did not use the terminology 'semantics' and 'pragmatics', preferring instead to distinguish between 'what is said' and 'what is implicated'.⁸ 'What is said', in Grice's favoured sense, is intended to pick out the 'central meaning' of a sentence, s, something which we might think qualifies as the semantic content of that sentence.⁹ Implicatures, on the other hand, are pragmatically conveyed propositions which may diverge from the literal meaning of the sentence uttered in significant ways. Grice distinguishes between conventional and non-conventional implicatures, but the general notion is easiest to see with reference to a specific kind of non-conventional implicature, namely conversational implicatures.

⁶ See Bach, 1987. One issue here concerns the existence of apparently successful speakers who are unable to entertain the kind of higher-order intentions UM requires, e.g. autistic speakers who seem capable of producing meaningful linguistic utterances despite apparent theory of mind deficits, see Laurence, 1996; Glüer and Pagin, 2003. Although I can't explore this point here, it seems that whether or not autistic speakers do constitute genuine counterexamples to the Gricean project will depend on the precise role played by speaker intentions. If we treat Grice's account as an A-style theory then it might be that such speakers could exploit a pre-existing system of conventional meaning, even while being unable to form the intentions required by UM.

⁷ UM receives a range of subtly different formulations, both within Grice's work and across other IBS accounts; for instance, the addition of the parenthetical 'U believes that' in clauses (i) and (iii) occurs in Grice's 1989: Essay 6, 123, version of the definition. However, for our purposes, I think these subtle variations can be ignored.

⁸ Grice, 1989: Essay 6, 118.

⁹ Grice, 1989: Essay 5, 87–8 suggests that his privileged notion of 'what is said' is tied to the syntactic constituents of a sentence. Thus we should not conflate the Gricean notion with a perhaps more intuitive notion of 'what a speaker says by uttering a sentence' (which connects to judgements of indirect speech reports); see Saul, 2002.

Conversational implicatures occur when a speaker wilfully flouts what Grice takes to be a quite general principle of good communication: "make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged".¹⁰ For Grice, this general principle subsumes such maxims as 'be as informative as required', 'don't utter what you believe to be false' and 'be relevant'. So if an otherwise competent speaker utters a sentence, the conventional meaning of which flouts one of these maxims in the current context of utterance, her audience will be licensed in inferring that the speaker does not mean to convey what the sentence itself says. Instead she should be taken as conveying some alternative, implicated proposition. For instance, imagine that I am looking at a list of marks for essays by students from Year 1, a year which contains the notoriously lax Smith. Seeing no mark next to Smith's name, I might utter "Well, someone didn't hand in an essay again." Now, the quite general literal proposition my sentence expresses seems, in this context, to flout Grice's maxim of quantity, which states roughly that a speaker should aim to convey as much relevant information as possible.¹¹ For there is a much more informative proposition I could have produced in this context, namely that *Smith didn't hand in an essay again*. Yet so long as my audience are aware of this fact they will be able to infer that, although I literally express only a quite general proposition, I actually intend to conversationally implicate the more informative proposition directly concerning Smith.

There is obviously much to be said about implicatures, but the important point to notice from our current perspective is simply that the existence of implicatures entails that there will be a notion of utterer's-meaning which will not be relevant to the core IBS project. This will be the case whenever a speaker intends to convey an implicature, for here, though the speaker intends to produce a belief in her audience via some utterance, the belief she intends to produce diverges from the conventional content of the sentence uttered.¹² However, the claim of Gricean IBS is that we can also isolate a notion of UM which *does* deal with genuinely semantic content, namely those instances of the schema which deal with what is said by a sentence, or its 'timeless meaning'.¹³ It is at this point in the Gricean system, then, that many proponents of IBS make the connection to some notion of *convention*.¹⁴ UM will deliver what we might think of as the genuinely semantic content of a sentence where there is a convention among a community of speakers to use an expression of type x in the way specified by the given instance of UM. Conventional speaker intentions are constitutive of meaning: what matters for an expression coming to have a given meaning in a given community is that the expression be used by one speaker to convey a certain meaning and that this use be picked up by the community, so that there comes to be a convention of using this word in this way. Notice, however, that this is an answer to a constitutive question concerning the kind of thing linguistic meaning

¹⁰ Grice, 1989: Essay 2, 26.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 28–33.

¹² *Ibid.*: Essay 14, 221.

¹³ *Ibid.*: Essay 6, 121.

¹⁴ E.g. see Schiffer, 1972: chs 5 and 6.

is. It does not as yet entail anything about the route current interlocutors need take to recover the semantic content of any expression. Specifically, it seems that there is no requirement that hearers have access to, or reason about, the mental states of a *current* speaker.¹⁵

If this is correct, then the role accorded to speaker intentions in the Gricean project is a preconditional one. It is an A-style IBS and thus allows that an audience may grasp the semantic content of a sentence even if they know nothing of the current speaker's aims or intentions.¹⁶ However, it seems that we could also envisage an alternative kind of intention-based account—one which accords a much more thorough-going role to speaker intentions. To see this let us turn now to a different kind of approach, drawn from Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory.¹⁷

12.2 B-STYLE INTENTION-BASED SEMANTICS (B-STYLE IBS)

According to relevance theory, there is an integral role for current speaker intentions to play in determining the truth-conditional content of an utterance.¹⁸ For both Grice and Sperber and Wilson (henceforth 'S&W') a linguistic production is simply a (good) piece of evidence about what the speaker means and to grasp this meaning the addressee must engage in some inferential reasoning. However, for S&W, what the addressee reasons about is not (directly) the intentions of the speaker but rather the machinations of relevance, which in turn serve to make speaker intentions evident:

[E]very act of ostension communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance—Ostensive behaviour provides evidence of one's thoughts. It succeeds in doing so because it implies a guarantee of relevance. It implies such a guarantee because humans automatically

¹⁵ I'm grateful to Kent Bach and Jim Higginbotham for stressing this point.

¹⁶ That this is the Gricean view is suggested by Neale, 1992: 500–2, who writes: "[One might think] that Grice's project gets something 'backwards': surely any attempt to model how we work out what someone means on a given occasion will progress from word meaning plus syntax to sentence meaning, and from sentence meaning plus context to what is said, and from what is said plus context to what is meant. And doesn't this clash with Grice's view that sentence meaning is analysable in terms of utterer's meaning? I do not think this can be correct... It is no part of Grice's theory that in general a hearer must work out what U meant by uttering a sentence X in order to work out the meaning of X. Such a view is so clearly false that it is difficult to see how anyone might be induced to subscribe to it or attribute it to another philosopher... Grice himself is explicit on this point: 'Of course, I would not want to deny that when the vehicle of meaning is a sentence (or the utterance of a sentence), the speaker's intentions are to be recognized, in the normal case, by virtue of a knowledge of the conventional use of the sentence (indeed, my account of nonconventional implicature depends on this idea' (*SITWW*, pp. 100–1). Importantly, an *analysis* of sentence meaning does not conflict with this idea."

¹⁷ As we will see in the next section, it is unlikely that such an intention-based semantics would in fact be endorsed by Sperber and Wilson, thus a straightforward ascription of the position to them would be misplaced.

¹⁸ See S&W, 1986; Carston, 2002.

turn their attention to what seems most relevant to them. [Our] main thesis... is that an act of ostension carries a guarantee of relevance, and that this... *principle of relevance* makes manifest the intention behind the ostension.¹⁹

Relevance here is a technical term (though clearly related to the natural language homonym), whereby an interpretation is relevant just in case the cognitive cost of processing the event which demands the attention of the agent is outweighed by the cognitive benefits of that processing (where benefits include deriving or strengthening new assumptions, and confirming or rejecting previous assumptions).²⁰ 'Optimal relevance' states that the first interpretation which crosses the relevance threshold is the right one; that is, that the first relevant interpretation the addressee arrives at is the one the speaker intended to communicate.

So, the key to assessments of meaning seems to be the actions of an inferential mechanism aimed at articulating speaker intentions connected to a particular communicative act.²¹ However, despite the apparently central role for speaker intentions on this kind of picture, there are questions to be raised about classifying this account as a form of IBS. For a start, one might wonder exactly how integral the appeal to speaker intentions really is within relevance theory. For S&W emphasize the role of the relevance mechanisms in a processing account, i.e. they couch the theory in terms of the (potentially sub-personal) cognitive mechanisms underlying linguistic comprehension. Yet if the assumption is that as a brute psychological fact both addressee and hearer have the same, relevance directed, psychological mechanisms, it's not clear that the addressee ever need move to the more reflective step of judging the relevant interpretation as revelatory of the speaker's intentions (the thought is roughly that, on this account, recognition of intention becomes something of an epiphenomenon in the process of utterance interpretation).²² If this construal were correct then, despite its Gricean heritage, relevance theory would end up more removed from IBS than it initially appeared. However, we should be clear that S&W also stress the importance of the mutual manifestness of intentions in making an act a genuinely communicative act: it is this factor which distinguishes genuine communication from all other forms of sub-personal co-ordination (like, say, the automatic accommodation agents make to avoid bumping into each other on the street). So, despite the autonomy of the psychological, relevance-directed mechanisms from speaker intentions, it still seems to be the case that recognition of speaker intentions is necessary for an act to count as genuinely communicative for S&W.

However, a more fundamental reason for resisting the classification of relevance theory as a form of IBS is that S&W explicitly state that semantics for them deals with

¹⁹ S&W, 1986: 50. ²⁰ *Ibid.*: 47–50. ²¹ S&W, 1986: 23.

²² Kempson, 1986: 90 notes the potential irrelevancy of grasp of speaker intentions on a relevance theoretic account. This point is, I think, related to, though distinct from, the worry voiced by Bach, 1987 and 1999: 79, where he objects to accounts like S&W's on the grounds that they neglect the self-referential or reflexive nature of Gricean communicative intentions.

non-propositional/non-truth-evaluable items which are arrived at *without* appeal to speaker intentions. They write:

What are the meanings of sentences? Sentence meanings are sets of semantic representations, as many semantic representations as there are ways in which the sentence is ambiguous. Semantic representations are incomplete logical forms, i.e. at best fragmentary representations of thoughts. . . . One entertains thoughts; one does not entertain semantic representations of sentences. Semantic representations of sentences are mental objects that never surface to consciousness. If they did, they would be entirely uninteresting (except, of course, to semanticists). Semantic representations become mentally represented as a result of an automatic and unconscious process of linguistic decoding. They can be used as assumption schemas to identify first the propositional form and then the explicatures of an utterance. It is these explicatures alone that have contextual effects, and are therefore worthy of conscious attention.²³

The picture of linguistic comprehension which emerges in S&W's project is then as follows. Imagine that A and B are discussing the problems in retaining valuable colleagues, A points at C and says "She's leaving". To understand this communicative exchange an addressee needs to engage in three stages of processing:

Semantic decoding \Rightarrow incomplete logical form

Pragmatic inference (1) \Rightarrow proposition expressed/explicature (e.g. *C is leaving the university*)

Pragmatic inference (2) \Rightarrow implicature (e.g. *A isn't happy about this*)

Semantic decoding yields something incomplete here because we need to look to the context of utterance to discover *what* C is leaving. Only once we've found this out do we get a truth-condition for the sentence A produced. Clearly, then, by their own lights, relevance theory is *not* a form of IBS, since semantics for S&W deals with propositional schemas, or incomplete logical forms, which are arrived at simply through decoding and not through any sensitivity to speaker intentions. However, on a perhaps more standard reading of 'semantics', where it deals with complete propositions, or truth-conditions, it looks as if relevance theory *is* a form of IBS, since complete propositions are (in general) arrived at only after some pragmatic inference, aimed at articulating speaker intentions, has taken place (i.e. they emerge only at the level of pragmatic inference (1), which delivers the explicature of the utterance).²⁴

So, if we take 'semantics' (as is common in philosophy, especially among formal semanticists) to concern complete propositions or truth-conditional content, it does seem plausible to label *both* Grice's programme and the relevance-based account

²³ S&W, 1986: 193. 'Explicature' is S&W's technical term for the literal meaning of an utterance, a level of complete (propositional or truth-conditional) content recovered via certain contextual enrichments of the incomplete logical form of the sentence uttered.

²⁴ Kempson, 1986: 102 writes: "The semantic component of a grammar neither completely specifies the propositions to be paired with any given sentence, nor is restricted to specifying such propositions. The semantic component of a grammar indeed does not provide a semantic theory for a language at all in the philosophical sense."

sketched in this section as forms of IBS, for on both accounts semantic content depends on the intentional states of speakers. However, according to the (A-style) position of §1, the crucial intentions concern conventional use and are thus independent of the intentional states of a current speaker. While, according to the (B-style) position of this section, the crucial intentions include those belonging to the current speaker. So, now we can ask which kind of account is better equipped to provide a semantic theory for a language—that is to say, what is the role of speaker intentions in an appealing intention-based semantics?

12.3 THREE POINTS OF DIFFERENCE

We have two different kinds of approach, both of which accord a central role to speaker intentions. According to the reading of Grice offered in Section 12.1, speaker intentions play a preconditional role in determining linguistic meaning, though this does not necessarily entail anything about the route by which a current interlocutor recovers literal meaning. According to the relevance-based account outlined in Section 12.2, on the other hand, it is access to current speaker intentions which provides the route to grasp of semantic (i.e. truth-evaluable) content in any current linguistic exchange. To help us decide which version of IBS is more feasible, I want now to highlight three points of difference between the two accounts. Then, in the next section, I'll argue that it is the characteristics of A-style IBS which prove more attractive.

(i) *Are sentences or utterances the primary bearers of semantic content?*

As we have already seen, our two opposing accounts take different stances in respect of this question. For Grice, although the notion of speaker meaning is crucial, semantic content attaches not at the level of utterances but at the level of sentences, for it is only at this more abstract level that the idea of conventional speaker meanings can emerge. If we concentrate just on a single utterance, though we might be able to specify utterer's meaning we cannot establish sentence-meaning. For S&W, however, it is usually the utterance which forms the first point at which truth-conditional (semantic) content can be recovered. It is speech acts, or ostensive acts in general, which connect most directly with intentional states, and which thus provide the point at which something truth-evaluable may be recovered. So our two accounts focus on different items as the primary locus of literal linguistic meaning: for A-style accounts it is some fairly abstract notion of a sentence-type, while for B-style theories it is the much more concrete and context-bound notion of an utterance which is paramount.

(ii) *What kind of cognitive processes are involved in recovering semantic content?*

Again, it seems that our two varieties of IBS will differ in the answers they give to this question. According to an A-style account, it seems possible that the processes by

which meaning is recovered may run along exhaustively (or at least predominantly) mechanistic or syntactic trails. An interlocutor can grasp the semantic content of a sentence via a grasp of its syntactic parts and knowledge of the conventional use of those parts. This sort of procedure looks like it might be given a fairly mechanistic explanation, akin to simple decoding. Whereas, given the more pervasive appeal to speaker intentions in a B-style approach, no such mechanistic route to meaning will be available. For the B-style theory, grasping semantic content will be an essentially *reason-based* or *inferential* activity.²⁵ Coming to grasp propositional or truth-evaluable content will be a process of reasoning about the state of an interlocutor's mind, based on past and present evidence of their nature and interests, together with other (mutually known) background beliefs.

This yields another, related, difference: the kinds of inferential processes licensed by B-theories on route to semantic content will not be simple, deductive inferences, but rather all-things-considered, abductive inferential moves.²⁶ What the addressee has to reason her way to is the most fitting or relevant interpretation of some utterance given features of the context of utterance, background beliefs about conventional behaviour and social mores, and about the specific aims and objectives of the speaker and of this conversational exchange. Thus the reasoning will be a form of inference to the best explanation, an 'all-things-considered process' which could, in principle appeal to any aspect of the agent's knowledge. Clearly, though, one crucial aspect of the inferential procedure will be the addressee's ability to ascertain the intentional states of the communicative agent. Thus, to use currently popular terminology, to grasp the semantic content of a sentence like 'The apple is red', the B-style IBS theorist suggests one needs more than simple decoding processes, one also needs an ability to *mind-read*. For instance, in this case, one needs to appeal to current speaker intentions to determine in which respect the apple is claimed to be red (e.g. its skin or its flesh).

This seems very different to the approach of the A-theorist, who (at least *prima facie*) claims that assessments of literal meaning need invoke no capacity for mind-reading. For the A-theorist, to grasp the meaning of a sentence what matters is that the agent undertake the correct computation or translation procedure, and this will be a predominantly mechanistic procedure—something which can be undertaken *without* appeal to rich features of the context of utterance (such as speaker intentions) and without appeal to non-deductive inference procedures (i.e. abductive or all-things-considered reasoning).²⁷

²⁵ Certain distinctions are suppressed here for reasons of space. For instance, Recanati, 2002 has argued that, while it is right to think of linguistic comprehension as inferential in a broad sense (i.e. as involving reason-based manipulations of conceptual representations, but manipulations which occur potentially subpersonally and with a high degree of automaticity), it is a mistake to see it as inferential in a narrow sense, as he suggests S&W do (i.e. as a consciously inferential process).

²⁶ See Josephson and Josephson, 1994 for a detailed discussion of abductive reasoning.

²⁷ There is an important question to be addressed here concerning the recovery of truth-evaluable content for context-dependent expressions, such as demonstratives and indexicals. Determining semantic content for such expressions appears to require relativization to a context and, it may be argued, the

Of course, things are complex here, for it is not simply the case that the B-style IBS theorist must claim *all* aspects of understanding of meaning are inferential, while the A-style IBS theorist must claim *all* aspects of linguistic understanding are mechanistic. Instead the truth lies somewhere in between: the B-theorist may claim that some (initial) aspect of linguistic comprehension is simply decoding. Thus, as we've seen, she may claim that phonetic or orthographic or syntactic processing, up to the point of logical form representation, is a simple act of decoding—mapping input received via the senses to internal representations purely on the basis of the form of this input. However, what the B-theorist will then claim is that the result of this decoding process radically underdetermines analyses of propositional content and that to arrive at this richer level of interpretation there must be an ineliminable appeal to current speaker intentions (thus it is only by working out that the speaker of 'the apple is red' intends to convey, say, that the apple is red *on its skin* that one grasps the semantic content in play). A-theorists, on the other hand, come at things from the other direction: though there may be an element of rich, inferential processing required prior to grasp of what *a speaker says by a given utterance*, this inferential processing occurs post-semantically and is not relevant for judgements of literal linguistic meaning. For them it is the brute, mechanistic process that reveals literal linguistic meaning, with rich inferential processing appealing to speaker intentions occurring only as a possible adjunct to a more fundamental process of linguistic interpretation. So, though both accounts allow a role for both decoding and inference, the difference in emphasis is clear.

(iii) *Is linguistic meaning a species of general ostensive behaviour?*

This difference between decoding and inference surfaces again in the kind of phenomenon each approach takes understanding of language to be. B-style IBS accounts see linguistic meaning as in important respects non-unique; linguistic acts form a subset of a much wider ranging phenomenon, namely ostensive behaviour per se. Thus there will be no difference *in kind* between pointing at a cake while licking one's lips and asking the baker for a slice.²⁸ Both actions require the addressee to employ her theory of mind to attribute those intentional states to the agent which best explain the action. Though the types of intentions recognized in, or the amount of evidence supplied by, each case may be slightly different (perhaps being more specialized in the case of utterance interpretation) linguistic communication is not a radically different kind of ostensive act.²⁹

For A-style IBS accounts this assimilation of language to communicative behaviour in general is, if not mistaken, then at least misleading. Though words and

features of the context which are relevant (e.g. the referential intentions of the speaker) require mind-reading to recover. However, for reasons of space, I will leave the discussion of what I would term 'overt context-sensitivity' to one side for now; see Borg, 2004a; 2004b, ch.3.

²⁸ Grice, 1989: Essay, 14; Schiffer, 1972: 7–13.

²⁹ As Carston, 1999: 104 notes: "[T]he use of a linguistic system, or some other code, for ostensive purposes provides the relevance-constrained inferential mechanisms with information of a much more fine-grained and determinate sort than is available otherwise."

mimes may both serve to get one's message across (and thus at one, very broad, level of brushstroke may be classified together), to treat the former as a mere subset of the latter runs the risk of underestimating the considerable differences between the two forms of communication. With the emphasis they place on the exhaustive nature of mechanistic processes, the formal theorist claims that linguistic meaning is fundamentally special. No matter how easy it is to interpret the dog whining by the door as 'saying' it wants to go out, or the pre-linguistic child pointing to the ice-cream as communicating that she wants to eat it, neither of these communicative actions belongs to the same kind as uttering 'I want to go outside' or saying 'I would like that ice-cream.' Though utterances and actions may equally serve to get one's message across, according to the formal theorist, they are exploiting very different processes of comprehension when they do so.³⁰

There are, then, substantial differences between our two varieties of IBS. B-style IBS accounts take the intentional states of a current speaker to be crucial in establishing semantic content, thus they take utterances to be the primary bearers of semantic content, with sentence-level meaning (should it be required) abstracted from here. Grasp of semantic content will be a richly inferential, all-things-considered process, and they treat linguistic acts as not essentially different in kind to other types of communicative act, like mimes or gestures. On each of these points A-style IBS accounts can diverge.

12.4 A-STYLE VS. B-STYLE INTENTION-BASED SEMANTICS

It seems to me that, though intention-based approaches may ultimately have a crucial role to play in studies of language use, the mistake made by B-style accounts is to think that a theory of literal truth-conditional or propositional content can or should be simply subsumed within a theory of communication. To see this, I want to explore (in reverse order) what I think is wrong with the three characteristics of B-style IBS accounts enumerated in the last section, and, conversely, what might be right about A-style accounts.

(i) *Is linguistic meaning a species of general ostensive behaviour?*

It's all very well to claim that linguistic acts belong to a much wider group of communicative acts in general (acts which include gestures, mimes, picture drawing, facial expressions, etc.) for at some degree of generalization all such acts clearly do share a common profile. However, we must ask whether grouping these acts together, simply on the basis of similarity at a very general level of description, really results in the most perspicuous categorization. One reason for thinking that this is not the case

³⁰ This point is also made by Laurence, 1996: 298–9.

is that such a categorization serves to disguise what seem to be some fundamental differences between communicative acts in general and linguistic acts in particular. Linguistic acts, uniquely in this area, have a crystallized component to their meaning, an element which they carry with them across all contexts and which may be accessed by a competent language user even if she has no access at all to the speaker's original intentions. Thus, if I come across the sentence 'Snow is white' it seems I can recover the proposition this sentence expresses (or consider the conditions under which an utterance of this sentence would be true) even if all I know about the sentence's producer is that they spoke English (and thus I have no access to the beliefs and desires which prompted production of the sentence). Yet these genuinely code-like qualities seem very different to the properties of other communicative acts, which depend on context in a far more constitutive way. A raise of the eyebrows may indicate surprise or consternation or nothing, and which it is, and what the agent is surprised or upset about, are factors which can *only* be settled by finding something out about the context of production. The meaning of a non-linguistic ostensive act seems ineliminably tied to its context in a way that the meaning of a linguistic act is not. Furthermore, it seems that the kinds of processes involved in the comprehension of the two cases are radically different, which brings us to the next point.

(ii) *What kind of cognitive processes are involved in recovering semantic content?*

B-style IBS accounts claim that semantic content is arrived at via inferential processes generating hypotheses about speaker intentions. However, while this may seem a reasonable claim concerning what a speaker succeeds in communicating via her linguistic production, it seems to ignore the degree of autonomy which literal meaning possesses. What is literally meant seems to be independent of what the speaker intends her utterance to mean. Furthermore, it seems that the rich, inferential route to semantic content predicted by the B-style theory is at odds with an independently plausible picture of the kind of cognitive architecture which underlies linguistic comprehension. Specifically, it seems that an A-style account can allow, while a B-style theory cannot allow, that our semantic abilities are underpinned by a specific module for language.³¹

At its broadest, modularity of mind claims simply that the mind is composed of a number of discrete or encapsulated modules, each dedicated to some aspect of human intelligence, and each operating with its own deductive rules and representations. In Fodor's original account of modularity there were thought to be six primary modules (with each potentially containing yet smaller sub-modules), namely the 'input systems', consisting of the five senses plus language. Modules subservise a non-modular 'central processing unit', or general intelligence, which engages in the kind of open-ended, abductive processing (utilizing the outputs of the mechanistic, computational modules) which is paradigmatically human. Fodorian modules are characterized by a number of properties, including being domain

³¹ See Fodor, 1983; Borg 2004b, ch.2.

specific (each is dedicated to its own, specialized task), informationally encapsulated (modules are 'opaque', they don't have access to information not contained within that module), they are fast and their processing is mandatory. Finally, they are associated with hardwired neural systems and exhibit specific patterns of acquisition and loss.

Now there is, it seems, some evidence that grasp of literal, semantic content for sentences is the kind of ability which deserves a modular explanation; that is to say, literal linguistic comprehension displays the characteristics of a module. For instance, linguistic comprehension is 'switched on' only by a very specialized kind of input, grasp of meaning is incredibly fast and it does indeed seem to be mandatory.³² Furthermore, semantic understanding does seem to be associated with specific patterns of acquisition and loss. For instance, certain cognitive pathologies seem to show that an agent may retain semantic abilities even though they have lost a wide range of other cognitive skills (apparently including those associated with mind-reading). Thus certain patients with schizophrenia lose the ability to pick up on commonly conveyed meanings, instead displaying what we might class as a kind of 'over-literalism';³³ similarly, patients with Asperger's syndrome apparently show normal abilities in understanding literal sentence meaning but often fail to grasp the richer propositions speakers intend to communicate by their utterances (Asperger himself described his patients as 'talking like little professors'). Although I cannot properly rehearse all the empirical evidence here, such cases may lend support to the idea that linguistic comprehension in general, and semantic comprehension in particular, can be lost or preserved in isolation from other cognitive abilities, specifically including the ability to assess the mental states of others.

Yet claims of modularity for semantic comprehension seem to be in tension with the kind of picture given to us by B-style IBS. For advocates of such approaches, if they accept modularity at all, are required to see any module for linguistic understanding as a dedicated sub-module within a wider 'theory of mind module', responsible for intentional interpretation in general (since semantic interpretation is just a type of intentional interpretation).³⁴ Yet it seems that nothing like this could be a Fodorian module, since, as noted above, the kinds of cognitive processes involved in such intentional interpretation simply do not fit with the limited,

³² As Fodor, 1983: 55.

³³ See Langdon, R, Davies, M, and Coltheart, M. 2002. 'Understanding minds and communicated meanings in schizophrenics', *Mind and Language*, 17: 68–104. As they write: "[I]t has been known for many years that patients with frontal lesions exhibit pervasive pragmatics deficits including (a) difficulty with formulating hints . . . (b) impaired ability to provide adequate information (e.g. when explaining a board game to a novice . . .) (c) failure to take account of a listener's interest when conversing . . . and (d) literal misinterpretations of sarcastic utterances . . . More recently it has been found that patients with frontal lesions also demonstrate general mind-reading deficits on story and cartoon versions of traditional theory-of-mind tasks and on a less traditional perspective-taking test of general mind-reading ability. Finally there is evidence from within the psychiatric literature that individuals who become poor pragmatic communicators later in life due to some form of late on-set neuropathology also turn out to be poor mind-readers. The primary example here . . . is schizophrenia" (76). However, it seems that none of these forms of cognitive impairment adversely affect sufferers handling of literal sentence meaning.

³⁴ See Sperber and Wilson, 2002.

computational processes of Fodor's modules. Indeed, the 'theory of mind module' shares several characteristics with the kind of thing Fodor has in mind for the (global) general intelligence: both will work on abductive, inference-to-the-best-explanation principles and both will require access to an indefinite range of information, including past and present perceptual information, knowledge of social behaviour and conventions, and assessments of intentional states. Finally, any account which places linguistic comprehension within a wider module dealing with communicative acts in general may face problems in explaining those cases where semantic abilities appear to remain in tact while other communicative abilities are lost. We can't hope to fully explore the modularity approach to the mind here, but we do reach at least a conditional claim: *if* we think that the hallmarks of modules include non-abductive processing and informational encapsulation, and we think that linguistic comprehension, up to and including semantic understanding, should be susceptible to a modular explanation, *then* we must reject B-style IBS accounts.³⁵

(iii) *Are sentences or utterances the primary bearers of semantic content?*

It is certainly true that what interlocutors are concerned with, in the most part, are utterances. When we are interested in what we are being told, or how a linguistic act impinges on our cognitive life, what we want to deal with are utterances. However, the A-style theorist can cede all of this to her opponent while claiming that sentence meaning (as opposed to speaker meaning) remains a separate level of content (which perhaps is not even calculated in every communicative exchange, but which *could* be calculated in any case). This sentence level content will then have a distinct role to play, for instance it will give us a level of content which is not cancellable, that is, from which a speaker can rescind only at the cost of contradiction. This is in stark contrast to any pragmatically enriched or altered interpretation of an uttered sentence, which can be denied by a speaker without literal contradiction (though a charge of obfuscation may well be made). Furthermore, the sentence level content will be important for other purposes, like grasping the meaning of a written sentence abstracted from its context, or providing an analysis which reveals which arguments are formally valid and which go through only on the strength of background assumptions. So, we seem to have reasons to resist the B-theorists claim that utterances, not sentences, are the primary bearers of semantic content.

12.5 CONCLUSION

I have argued that, with respect to the three points of difference sketched in §3, it is the characteristics of the A-style approach which seem better suited to semantic

³⁵ The recognition of a tension between B-style IBS and Fodorian modularity does not necessarily conflict with our earlier recognition (n.5) that Fodor himself endorses IBS, for he ultimately holds that semantic content properly attaches only at the level of thought, rejecting the idea of a semantics for natural languages. See Fodor, 1989: 418–19; Fodor, 1998, ch. 6.

theorizing. If this is correct, then, if we want to develop an intention-based semantics for natural language, it seems that we should follow the weaker, A-style approach (here attributed to Grice) rather than assign any more substantive role to speaker intentions. Yet, if this is the case, a question might now emerge concerning the relation of IBS to other varieties of semantic theory; specifically, it is no longer clear to what degree IBS constitutes a genuine alternative to what we might think of as formal semantics (e.g. a truth-conditional approach, such as that instigated by Davidson). According to formal semantic theories the route to semantic content runs exclusively along syntactic trails. That is to say, all propositional or truth-conditional semantic content can be traced back to the syntactic level and it is delivered by formal operations over the syntactic representations of sentences.³⁶ Just as with an A-style IBS approach, the formal theorist will maintain that (formally described) sentences, rather than utterances, are the primary bearers of semantic content. She will also hold that the route to meaning runs (either exclusively or at least predominantly) via formal decoding processes and maintain that grasp of semantic content is a computational process (possibly underpinned by a discrete language faculty), rather than a richly inferential, abductive process. Following on from this, the formal theorist will maintain that linguistic meaning is a very different creature to ostensive or gestural meaning. So, with respect to characteristics like (i–iii) above, both A-style IBS and traditional formal approaches are entirely in agreement. Furthermore, it seems that a formal theorist could easily incorporate the kind of preconditional role for speaker intentions recognized by A-style IBS accounts. On a formal approach, just as on an A-style IBS account, it may be allowed that what makes a given physical item meaningful, and indeed what determines the precise meaning that it has, is its connection to the conventional, intentional practices of a community of speakers. One question we might need to go on to address, then, is: exactly what is the relationship between A-style IBS and formal semantic theories?

Finally, we might ask where this leaves B-style theories? If it is right to think that B-style IBS accounts are not plausible, does this mean that there is no role to be played by current speaker intentions in settling questions of meaning? The answer to this question, however, is clearly 'no'. For though I have argued for the retention of a level of propositional content divorced from current speaker intentions, and claimed this literal, sentence-level meaning is the proper subject of semantics, I certainly have not shown that appeals to current speaker intentions are unnecessary in an analysis of linguistic communicative acts. Indeed, far from it, hypothesizing about speaker intentions seems to be crucial to understanding our rich, informative, communicative behaviour. If this is right, it seems that though we might reject B-style intention-based *semantics* in favour of either an A-style or a formal approach, we may nevertheless recognize that B-style intention-based theories of *communication* may prove essential to a proper understanding of our

³⁶ For instance, the kinds of processes involved may be canonical derivations of truth conditions, see Larson and Segal, 1995.

linguistic behaviour as a whole: mind-reading may be the key to communication, even if it is not the key to linguistic meaning.³⁷

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³⁷ Thus S&W, 1986: 21 write: “[The Gricean definition of utterer’s meaning] can be developed in two ways. Grice himself used it as the point of departure for a theory of ‘meaning’, trying to go from the analysis of ‘speaker’s meaning’ towards such traditional semantic concerns as the analysis of ‘sentence meaning’ and ‘word meaning’ . . . [W]e doubt that very much can be achieved in this direction. However, Grice’s analysis can also be used as a point of departure for an inferential model of communication, and this is how we propose to take it.” Certainly, this quote undermines any categorization of relevance theory as a form of intention-based semantics as opposed to an intention-based theory of communication. However, we should also note that, despite their avowed interest in communication rather than semantics, relevance theorists do tend to draw some quite radical conclusions about philosophical semantics, claiming that the project of determining truth-conditional content on the basis of formal features of sentences alone is doomed to failure. Yet clearly *this* is a claim about sentence-meaning (the traditional subject of semantics) and not merely about communicated or speaker meaning.

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