Symposium on Remnants of Meaning
3. *The End of the Theory of Meaning*

MARK JOHNSTON

In the paper 'Can Analytic Philosophy be Systematic and Ought it to Be?' Michael Dummett ventures the following characterization of analytic philosophy:

> What has given philosophy its historical unity, what has characterized it over all the centuries as a single subject, is the range of questions which philosophers have attempted to answer: there has been comparatively little variation in what has been recognized as constituting a philosophical problem. What has fluctuated wildly is the way in which philosophers have in general characterized the range of problems with which they attempt to deal, and the kind of reasoning which they have accepted as providing answers to these problems. Sometimes philosophers have claimed that they were investigating, by purely rational means, the most general properties of the universe; sometimes, that they have been investigating the workings of the human mind; sometimes, again, that they have been providing, when these exist, justifications for our various claims to knowledge concerning differe· t types of subjectmatter. Only with Frege was the proper object of philosophy finally established: namely, first, that the goal of philosophy is the analysis of the structure of thought; secondly, *that the study of thought is to be sharply distinguished from the study of the psychological process of thinking*; and, finally, that the only proper method for analyzing thought consists in the analysis of language. As I have argued, the acceptance of these three tenets is common to the entire analytical school; but, during the interval between Frege's time and now, there have been within that school many somewhat wayward misinterpretations and distortions of Frege's basic teaching, and it has taken nearly a half-century since his death for us to apprehend clearly what the real task of philosophy, as conceived by him, involves (Dummett 1978, my italics).

One might wonder what the study of thought is to be once it is distinguished from the psychological study of the process of thinking. What is then left to be studied? Well, for Frege, as for Kant, the study of thought was to be the study of the most general conditions of objective representation, where a representation is objective in this most general sense only if it is meaningful to ask whether things are as the representation has them as being. Thus analytic philosophy deserves the name of philosophy because it is centrally concerned with a question which none of the special sciences can answer—the question of what has to be the case for those sciences among other areas of discourse to be objective or engage with a subject matter. Analytic philosophy distinguishes itself from other philosophical traditions by its claim that neither metaphysics nor epistemology but philosophy of language is first philosopy, which is to say the area of philosophy in which the fundamental question of objectivity is most directly explicated and answered. Behind this claim is Frege's insight as interpreted by Dummett—that language is not a mere code in which we cast our thoughts but is of the essence of thought.

> For Frege, as for all subsequent analytical philosophers, the philosophy of language is the foundation of all other philosophy because it is only by the analysis of language that we can analyze thought. Thoughts differ from all else that is said to be among the contents of the mind in being wholly communicable: it is of the essence of thought that I can convey to you the very thought I have, as opposed to being able to tell you merely something about what my thought is like. It is of the essence of thought, not merely to be communicable, but to be communicable, without residue, by means of language. In order to understand thought, it is necessary, therefore, to comprehend the means by which thought is expressed. If the philosopher attempts,in the manner I mentioned earlier, to strip thought of its linguistic clothing and penetrate to its pure naked essence, he will merely succeed in confusing the thought itself with the subjective inner accompaniments of thinking. We communicate thoughts by means of language because we have an implicit understanding of the working of language, that is, of the principles governing the use of language; it is these principles, which relate to what is open to view in the employment of language, unaided by any supposed contact between mind and mind other than via the medium of language, which endow our sentences with the senses that they carry. In order to analyze thought, therefore, it is necessary to make explicit those principles, regulating our use of language, which we already implicitly grasp (ibid, p. 442).

For Dummett, *a theory of meaning* was a theory which articulates the principles we implicitly understand and which govern the use of language. Anyone who had a worry about there being anything for the study of

thought to be once it is distinguished from the study of the psychological process of thinking will now worry that a theory of the principles we implicitly understand and which govern our use of language could only be a psycholinguistic theory.

In the heyday of the philosophy of language (the late sixties and the seventies) this question of how a theory of meaning could be an objective of philosophical investigation was displaced by a question about the *form* a theory of meaning was to take. Dummett maintained that since a theory of meaning was to be something which was implicitly known by speakers of the language in question, grasp of its propositions must be in principle manifestable by speakers. So grasp of the meaning of declarative sentences could be no more than grasp of the conditions under which they may be used to make correct assertions. Accordingly, a theory of meaning, or at least the core of it that applied to declarative sentences, had to take the form of a statement of assertibility conditions. For speakers could not in principle manifest grasp of evidence-transcendent truth conditions. As against this, Donald Davidson proposed that a theory of meaning for a language could take the form of a theory which paired sentences with their possibly evidence-transcendent truth conditions, where the pairing was one generated by an interpreter who associated plausible truth conditions with the speakers' sentences so as to maximize truth or at least minimize inexplicable falsehood over the assertions of the speakers. (See the essays in Davidson 1984.)

For a short while it seemed to some that philosophy of language was beginning to deliver on its foundational promise. For what was the debate between truth-conditional and assertibility-conditional conceptions of meaning if not a new way of raising, sharply and without essential reliance on metaphysical pictures, the traditional realist/non-realist debate about the relation between judgement and its various subject matters? (See Dummett 1976 and the Preface to Dummett 1978).

A third approach to meaning was developed by Paul Grice who proposed analyses of what it was to mean that p by uttering a sentence 'S'. The analyses had recourse to complex propositional attitudes and promised to reduce talk about meaning to talk about iterated and audience-directed attitudes on the part of speakers (Grice 1957, 1968, 1969). The Gricean programme seemed to those philosophers who had an independent commitment to physicalism to offer hope of finding a physicalist accommodation with talk about meaning. The Gricean programme would analyse talk of meaning in terms of talk about propositional attitudes, and propositional attitudes in their turn could be argued to be, via a defense of functionalism, none other than types of physical states.

Related reductive ambitions were encouraged by Davidson's apparent location of the notion of meaning within the theory of reference by means of his claim that a theory of truth could do duty as a theory of meaning, and by Saul Kripke's spectacular success in demolishing the simple and intuitive description theories of reference (Kripke 1980). Several theorists, most notably Hartry Field (1979), aimed for a reductive causal account of

reference as an essential condition of avoiding 'semanticalism'—an allegedly pernicious overpopulation of the world with irreducibly semantical facts.

An assumption common to these positive programmes was that a compositional semantics was possible. After all, languages *seem* to have an infinite expressive power, so that a speaker's competence seems potentially infinite. So we must explain how it is that a finite creature could have such a competence. The answer forced upon us appears to be that the finite creature grasps the meaning of a finite number of primitive terms and comprehends a finite number of modes of combination of these terms, and that the meanings of all sentences are compounded out of the meanings of the primitives by means of the modes of combination. So, if a theory of meaning for a language L is either to characterize L-speakers' implicit semantic knowledge or at very least make it comprehensible how L-speakers could have an infinite capacity then a theory of meaning for L should be compositional, i.e. it should provide a way of deriving the meaning of any sentence of L from the meanings of the subsentential primitives found in the sentence. Hence the common assumption: a theory of meaning must provide a compositional semantics for the language in question.

In his wonderfully stimulating recent work *Remnants of Meaning*, Stephen Schiffer presents a considerable case against this common assumption and much else that has been regarded as orthodoxy in the philosophy of language. Schiffer himself has been one of the most notable exponents of the Gricean programme of finding a reductive analysis of statements about meaning. Indeed, his D. Phil. thesis, *Meaning*, remains the standard and most demanding work in this area (Schiffer 1972). Encouraged by the results achieved there, and wedded to a strongly reductive physicalism, Schiffer hoped to show that all the facts about the world were stable in sentences devoid of semantical and mentalistic idioms. *Remnants of Meaning* is a chronicle of dashed hopes. Schiffer engagingly recalls:

> I used to joke that I was able to refute all the theories compatible with my presuppositions, until one day in 1982 I finally decided that I probably was not joking. . . But that was not the end of it. . . In trying to deal with the negative conclusions thus reached, and to trace out their consequences for the philosophy of language and mind, I came gradually to give up virtually all of what I used to accept, and a good deal of what most philosophers still accept. Believing is not, after all, a relation that relates a believer to what she believes; natural languages do not, after all, have compositional meaning theories; and not only is IBS (= the Gricean Programme) a hopeless endeavor, but there can be no significant reduction or 'explication' of our semantic or propositional attitude notions; and in the end one is left with the no-theory theory of meaning, the deflationary thought that the questions that now define the philosophy of meaning and intentionality all have false presuppositions (*Remnants of Meaning*, p. xv).

The chronicle of dashed hopes is backed by such a wealth of argument that the usual reviewing strategy of extended and detailed quibbling would produce a book in response. Instead I propose to outline Schiffer's arguments for his major claims, suggest a way of resisting his pivotal moves concerning belief and compositional semantics, and defend in a preliminary way a general view about meaning—Minimalism—which I think independently confirms Schiffer's no-theory theory of meaning.

Is belief a relation which relates the believer to what she believes? As a preliminary to considering this question we should distinguish belief states and belief sentences. In so far as a problem about belief is supposed to raise a problem for a compositional semantics it has to be a problem about the semantic structure of belief sentences. If natural languages are to exhibit a compositional semantic structure then in general there must be some semantic value which is associated with a 'that'-clause in a propositional attitude sentence, a semantic value which contributes in a systematic way to the determination of the semantic value of the whole sentence. Now, on the face of it, the belief state of Ralph which makes it correct for us to say of him that Ralph believes that flounders snore could have a wide variety of possible configurations. It could be that what makes this true of Ralph is that he stands in some relation to an item in his mind, e.g. some mental representation which has the content that flounders snore. Or it could be that he is disposed to assent to some public language sentence with this content. Now it seems to be that taking one or another of these positions about the nature of a belief state is compatible with thinking that the semantic value associated with any 'that'-clause in any attitude sentence is an ordered pair of an n-tuple of objects and an n-adic property, or an ordered pair of an n-tuple of individual senses and a general sense, or a function from possible worlds to truth values, i.e. any of the things which contemporary philosophers have typically called propositions.

Hence some consternation might be caused by the following kind of summary of the options:

> We are assuming (initially, for the purposes of argument) that believing is a relation, in this sense: that 'y' in the schema 'x believes y' is an objectual variable whose values have features that determine the intentional or contentful features of belief. If IBS is true, these content-determining features of the objects of belief must not be public language semantic features, features that pre-suppose meaning in a public-communicative language. This means that if IBS is true, then the objects of belief are either propositions or mental representations. But the objects of beliefs we now know cannot be propositions. They must therefore be mental representations, sentences in one's language of thought, if IBS is true (ibid, p. 74).

This sort of thing *can* look on its face like a confusion between belief sentences and belief states, but even if it were that it would be easily

cleared up. The Gricean or IBS (Intention Based Semantics) programme aims at analyzing talk about the meaning of public language sentences in terms of talk about complex intentions. But if talk about having a belief or an intention has to be analyzed in terms of talk about relations to public language sentences then we may wonder what reductive progress has been achieved. So if IBS is to be successful, then the philosophical analysis of the sentence 'Ralph believes that flounders snore' cannot relate Ralph to a sentence in the public language. Schiffer also argues that in any case the actual proposals of this general sort, most notably Davidson's, fail on their own terms (see Chapter 5). When it comes to a philosophical analysis of propositional attitude sentences in terms of a relation between the subject and some sentence in his language of thought, Schiffer supposes that if this theory is to be really distinct from the propositionalist theory of belief, and to be motivated by philosophical considerations, it will have to be wedded to a naturalistic and reductive theory of the contents of the attitudes; for example, that developed in Jerry Fodor's *Psychosemantics* (1987). (Schiffer is persuasively skeptical about such reductive accounts and for a whole battery of reasons spread throughout Chapters Four and Six.)

How then stands the stocks of the propositionalist theory of belief, the theory which has it that the semantic value associated with 'that'-clauses are propositions denoted by those clauses, so that Ralph believes that flounders snore iff ($\exists$x) (x is the proposition that flounders snore and Ralph believes x)? Well, some propositionalists take propositions to be sets of possible worlds, so that the proposition that p is identified with the set of worlds in which 'p' is true. This talk of identification could stand some scrutiny—is the set so obviously identical with the proposition or is it just that the set serves to usefully represent the proposition for certain purposes? In any case, the major difficulty for the possible worlds construal of propositions is all too well known—propositions will be identified when they are necessarily equivalent but it would be obviously wrong to report someone's belief that $2+2=4$ as the belief that arithmetic is consistent. Now clearly the possible world theorist's strategy is then to insist that there are pragmatic constraints on attitude reports, constraints that go beyond truth. But that leaves the theorist in the strange situation of rendering problematic the use of any intuitions about when a paraphrase of a belief report is acceptable. How, without transparent gerrymandering, will the theorist defend his account of the objects of the attitudes? As David Lewis once asked, why not suppose that the constraints on belief reports are almost all pragmatic, so that there is really only one proposition ever believed, e.g. that Allah alone is God and Mohammed is his prophet? That is, given the resort to pragmatics to explain attitude reports, it is then entirely unclear what counts as neutral evidence for one or another view of the nature and individuation conditions of propositions understood as the objects of the attitudes reported.

In *Remnants* Schiffer does not examine the possible worlds construal of propositions in much detail. He has, however, a good deal to say about two other theories of the objects of the attitudes.

Nathan Salmon (1986) and Scott Soames have revived in an interesting way the view that the objects of the attitudes are ordered pairs of n-tuples of individuals and properties. They of course recognize that their theory legitimates many surprising substitutions within attitude contexts, so that quite generally they are led to disregard disavowals of attitude. The question then is why take avowals of attitude seriously, i.e. why this selective attitude toward what on a more neutral view would be all and only the evidence for a theory of the objects of the attitudes?

A third theory of propositions as the objects of belief attempts to block the problematic substitutions by treating propositions as set-theoretic constructions of modes of presentation of individuals and properties. As Schiffer points out, if we think of modes of presentation as psychologically real determinants of individuals and properties then we face serious problems. Suppose for example that 'dog' is a natural kind term. Few of the enormous number of speakers capable of having beliefs about dogs have figuring in their psychology occurrent or dispositional, determinants of the kind *dog*. Ordinary speakers are capable of having beliefs about dogs in part because they could offer some constraints on what it is to be a dog, in part because they possess a reliable but not infallible capacity to recognize dogs and in part because they intend in their use of the term 'dog' to fall in with the conventional norms, whatever they are, that govern the use of the term. Hence in order to have beliefs about dogs one need not implicitly or explicitly know anything like necessary and sufficient conditions for being a dog. Believers need not have such determining modes of presentation figuring in their psychology. Kripke showed that this was true for names and natural kind terms, and adaptations of Tyler Burge's (1986) 'arthritis' case show that the point is quite general. At least two reactions are possible here. One is to maintain that propositions are complex meanings but insist that people do not come to have attitudes towards such propositions in virtue of grasping modes of presentation understood as psychologically real entities which determine denotations. Instead the story will have it that one has for example a belief that p if one is disposed to assent to some sentence which one understands and which means that p. To say this would be able to give up the reductive ambition characteristic of IBS, namely that of wholly explicating the meaning of sentences in the public language in terms of complex content-bearing states. For now the envisaged philosophical account of what it is to be in such a state will involve *inter alia* talk of a relation to meaning-bearing sentences in the public language. So it is no surprise that Schiffer takes another way out, namely to abandon the idea that the objects of the attitudes are complex meanings. However it is imperative here to note that someone who thought nothing of such reductive ambitions might find reason to take the other tack. (More on this below.)

In any case, Schiffer arrives at the claim that because there is no candidate for the objects of the attitudes we cannot represent attitudes as relational in the way we required to represent natural languages as having compositional semantic structure. So the assumption common to the three

programmes, and indeed to all theories of meaning, is in jeopardy. Since this is Schiffer's pivotal move against theories of meaning it deserves extended comment.

I can well imagine a philosopher of language replying that if this is the main point it doesn't cut very deeply. First, how do we know that the correct compositional theory of the attitudes is not just around the corner—how do we get from a list of failures to the *necessity* of failure? Secondly, maybe we won't ever find the correct theory, perhaps because this area of language is just too intractable for us as theorists. But still, haven't we illuminated the workings of a large fragment of natural languages by finding a compositional semantics for that fragment? And thirdly, isn't the general question about the form of a theory of meaning still to be regarded as a precise way of raising the foundational issue of realism and its alternatives? Even if the worst comes to Schiffer's worst, then there are many philosophers of language who will not be too perturbed to let the attitudes remain unregimented. And the most famous of these is W. V. O. Quine (1960) who took just this attitude in the book which initially set the agenda for philosophy of language as it is now known in the United States.

So it might seem that Schiffer has arrived at an over-pessimistic view of the philosophy of language as a whole because of his understandable concentration on the reductive programme of IBS. If the attitudes are not tractable then the reductive ambition of analyzing away talk about content fails. But why should the rest of philosophy of language be devoid of interest? Why can't there be a systematic account of the semantics of the vast fragments of natural languages which are free of propositional attitude terms. All that seems to have happened is that the Gricean reductionists have caught up with Quine.

Of course not even an idle browse through *Remnants* supports any such dismissive reading. Almost every programme—almost every major move—in philosophy of language is discussed in detail and with great analytic rigor. Davidson and Dummett do not escape unscathed. But all this destructive work deserves to be accompanied by a general hypothesis about why it has turned out to be so hard to come up with anything positive and defensible in the philosophy of language. And the general hypothesis should explain why the failure of the relational theory of belief is so vitiating for the philosophy of language. Schiffer's general hypothesis is an anti-reductionism about meaning and the attitudes—not only is talk about meaning irreducible to talk about the attitudes and vice versa, but neither can be reduced to non-intentional talk. Brentano returns with a vengence.

Perhaps it is worthwhile pointing out that there is at least one anti-reductionist view of this sort which allows of something like a proof that the objects of the attitudes are propositions understood as complex meanings. This view has it that the notions of truth, meaning and of the various attitudes are a connected family of notions embedded in a host of platitudes which allow for no significant reductions.

Aristotle articulated a fundamental platitude about truth—to say of what is that it is and of what is not that it is not is to speak the truth. If we allow ourselves to talk of things said, it is platitudinous to claim that when one speaks the truth what one says corresponds to the facts, i.e. correctly characterizes something that is the case. Similarly, it is a platitude to say that when one believes the truth what one believes corresponds to the facts; as it is to say that when one asserts the truth what one asserts corresponds to the facts. In order to summarize these platitudes, we could introduce the term 'proposition' for. the things said, believed, asserted, etc. and say that a proposition is true just in case it corresponds to the facts. Now it is an interesting question whether we can articulate platitudes which force upon us the recognition of structure in both propositions and facts so that correspondence can be spelled out in terms of an isomorphism between propositions and facts. But for my purposes here we need not go into this.

What about truth as applied to sentences? Here it is hard to resist the obvious claim that a declarative sentences 's' considered as a sentence of L is true just in case 'S' so considered means that p and p is true. (To simplify I abstract from context sensitivity.) Now we can identify meanings with propositions by way of platitudes like:

> 'S' considered as a sentence of L means that p iff in uttering 'S' in the assertoric mode component L-speakers would be asserting that p.

And:

> 'S' considered as a sentence of L means that p iff in non-deceptively uttering 'S' in the assertoric mode competent L-speakers would be expressing their belief that p.

As these principles together suggest, if we may speak of p as the meaning of 'S', then under the circumstances indicated p is also the thing believed or asserted. So at least sometimes propositions are complex meanings, and if sometimes why not always?

Now part of Schiffer's response to this argument may be predictable on the basis of one of the most interesting suggestions in his book. (See Chapter 6 'Ontological Physicalism and Sentential Dualism' where this suggestion is brought to bear upon the mind-body problem in a tantalizing way.) Schiffer will say that we can talk of the meaning of 'S' and the thing asserted or the thing believed by the utterer of 'S' but add that there is no reason to treat terms such as 'the meaning of 'S'' and 'the thing asserted' as genuinely referential terms.

However, it is unclear to me how such a view on its own could present any obstacle for a compositional semantics. Grant for the moment that 'the meaning of "S" or 'the proposition that p' are not genuinely referential in Schiffer's sense. As Schiffer himself insists, this is not to say that any

sentence containing such terms is thereby rendered false. Nor is it to say that one cannot existentially quantify into the positions held by such terms. It is just to say that such quantification is not ontologically committing. One could ask what account can be given for such quantification. But for now, suppose that such a view can be worked out. Wouldn't a general schema for belief suitable for a compositional semantics then be statable using such terms? Why not something like the following schema?

α believes that δ iff Bel (α, the meaning of 'δ')

'Bel' is here a two place predicate which concatenates with pairs of a genuine referential term and a term not genuinely referential. Give such a schema, it is far from evident that we need to believe that propositions or meanings are part of the inventory of being in order to state a compositional semantics which has meanings as the objects of the attitudes.

Perhaps Schiffer will adopt familiar examples to urge that substitution into belief contexts on the basis of synonymy does not preserve truth, so that the meanings of content sentences cannot be their semantic values. Surely, for example, there is someone who doesn't know that a vixen is a famale fox, yet everyone knows tht a female fox is a female fox.

Here a number of responses are possible. I will mention three. The first and most unsatisfactory is to tough it out: there is no one who does not know that a vixen is a female fox. This is reminiscent of the moves that must be made to defend the Soames/Salmon theory of belief—-there is no one who does not believe that Cicero is Tully. The second response is to deny that synonymy is identity of meaning in the sense relevant to the platitudes from which we derived the conclusion that the meaning of 'p' is the proposition that p or the thing believed when someone believes that p. Talk of meaning in the sense of the platitudes is talk of reified use. And there is a legitimate use of 'vixen' which is not a legitimate use of 'female fox', namely to report a certain sort of ignorance by completing the gap in sentences like 'Someone does not know that a — is a female fox'. But if this line is to prove adequate we must end up saying that no two words have the same meaning. Barring defense of a surprising claim of ambiguity in our talk about meaning, to deny that different words can have the same meaning is to be at odds with the most commonplace views. (I still believe this can be made out, however I leave these matters for another occasion.)

The third response, and the one which I will advance here, is to grant that the argument from synonymy shows that propositions are not structured meanings and yet still aim for a compositional semantics which uses singular terms such as 'the proposition that p' understood as denoting unstructured entities.

In effect then, I am saying that whether propositions are structured meanings or simply devoid of structure we can still develop a compositional clause for attitude sentences. Someone might insist that since we can't say anything very interesting about what propositions are, there

cannot be such things. Someone˚ perhaps the same someone, might insist that since we can't plausibly locate propositions in the network of causes and effects, there cannot be such things. Although I deeply suspect such lines of reasoning, they need not be resisted here. All we need to maintain is that there are (possibly non-referential) singular terms for the objects of the attitudes. Then we can state a schematic compositional clause for belief sentences. The resultant compositional semantics will simply follow the lineaments of a compositional syntax. Since philosophy has no business speculating about which if any of such syntaxes is psychologically real, no psychological claims can be made about the resultant compositional semantics.

All this, even if it could be completely made out, will seem to have trivialized the issue about a compositional semantics, severing it for example from the demand that the speakers of the language bear any interesting psychological relation to the structure or deliverances of the compositional theory. So, in particular, Dummett's hope that we could 'analyse thought' by making explicit within a theory of meaning 'those principles regarding our use of language which we already implicitly grasp'—a hope central to the aspirations and self-conception of analytic philosophy as Dummett saw it—is not vindicated by the kind of compositional semantics envisaged here.

That this is just what we should have expected all along is the upshot of what I call Minimalism about meaning, a view that consists of the following claims.

(1)   Meaning has no hidden and substantial nature for a theory to uncover. All we know and all we need to know about meaning in general is given by a family of platitudes of the sort articulated earlier.

(2)   Those platitudes taken together exhibit talk about the meaning of an expression as reifying talk about the potential of the expression to be used to assert, command, ask about, etc. various things.

(3)   So understanding the meanings of expressions is not something that lies behind and is the causal explanatory basis of the ability to use the expressions to assert, command, ask about, etc. various things. Rather it is constituted by this ability.

(4)   So a theory of meaning could be at most a statement of propositions knowledge of which would enable us to come to acquire the practical ability. But in this regard a translation manual could serve almost as well. Hence the interest of a theory of meaning is minimal and certainly no interesting issue about objectivity, realism or the relation between the mind and reality can be raised by considering questions about the form of a theory of meaning.

The family of platitudes which reveal talk of meaning to be reifying talk about the potential of expressions to be used to convey contents directly by means of various speech acts include the following. (I abstract again

from issues about context-dependence just to keep down the number of indices.)

> If 'S' is a declarative sentence of L then 'S' in L means that p iff in using 'S' in the assertoric mode L-speakers would thereby asset that p.
> If 'S' is an interrogative sentence of L then the declarative form of 'S' in L means that p iff in using 'S' in the inquisitorial mode L-speakers would thereby inquire whether p.
> If 'S' is an imperative sentence of L then the declarative form of 'S' in L means that p iff in using 'S' in the directing mode L-speakers would thereby command that p.

The temptation to look to the right-hand sides of these biconditionals for an analytic reduction of the notion of sentence meaning is easily dissipated. For the right-hand sides taken together just describe various determinate ways of using 'S' to mean that p. So far from offering hope of a reduction of talk of sentence meaning, the platitudes simply show how we can get from 'S' having the potential to be used to mean that p to 'S' meaning that p. It is just a simple paraphrase which gets us to reifying talk about the meaning of 'S' being p. But if this is the conceptual provenance of talk about the meaning of 'S' then we should suspect any attempt to represent grasp of *the meaning of 'S'* as the causal explanatory basis of the ability to use 'S' to assert, command, inquire concerning, etc. p. I am not of course denying that in particular cases one can extend one's competence in the language by means of a paraphrase, e.g. one can extend one's competence to the term 'bachelor' by grasping the meaning postulate *'bachelor' means the same as 'unmarried male'*. You could call this being guided in use by grasp of a meaning (the meaning of 'bachelor') if you liked but evidently it could not be quite generally true that use is guided in this sort of way. Here and elsewhere Minimalism about meaning resonates with one familiar reading of the passages on understanding in the *Investigations*—any attempt to take seriously the picture of speech as *quite generally* guided by grasp of the meanings of expressions collapses into one or another philosophical absurdity. It seems to me that it is *this* aspect of Wittgenstein's work, and not his anti-systematic strain as emphasized by Dummett in the essay I began by quoting, which is most threatening to the philosophical project of a theory of meaning as Dummett once conceived it.

Interpretive questions about Wittgenstein aside, Minimalism is at odds with any attempt to psychologize a theory of meaning, to talk of it as implicitly known and hence such that knowledge of its propositions could be quite generally the casual explanatory basis of competence in our native language. Could the theory of meaning still be an interesting area of endeavor given Minimalism? I do not think so; let me say why.

One might think that since language is used to represent the way the world is, and since there are limits, built-in limits, to how the world

can be represented by using assertorically certain sentences of a certain language, and since these limits are given by the meanings or contents of the sentences in question, then semantics or the theory of meaning has as its aim the characterization of the representational power of the declarative sentences of the language.[1] The trouble is that this aim can be all too easily achieved on the Minimalist view. A Minimalist theory of meaning will not be interestingly different from a translation manual. For the Minimalist will have no option but to constrain the content-associating theorems of the theory in terms of the platitudes about sentence meaning articulated above. So for the declarative sentences of a language L the following will be the characterization of a theory of meaning.

> θ is a theory of meaning for the language L iff for each sentence 'S' of L, θ yields a theorem of the form:

> M_L ('S', p)

> such that L-speakers in uttering 'S' in the assertoric mode would be thereby asserting that p.

Obviously, one theory which satisfies this condition is a 'means that' theory, i.e. a theory with theorems like:

> 'John loves Mary' means that John loves Mary.

Equally obviously, every theory of meaning has to aim for theorems with just this kind of pairing of sentences and contents, if not this way of packaging the pairings. But then there cannot be a very interesting difference between a theory of meaning for L and a manual for translation into L—a 'means the same as' theory. The syntactic difference between a 'means that' and a 'means the same as' theory has a consequence whose significance is sometimes overemphasized.[2] The consequence is that in order to come to know the meanings of the expressions of the target language via its theory of meaning you only need to know the language of the theory while to get the same information from a translation manual you need to know the meaning of the translating language and the meaning of the connecting dash; be it written ':', '-' 'means the same as' or something equivalent. Yes indeed, but this cannot be an important difference from the point of view of giving an account of what semantic contents are carried by sentences. From a Minimalist point of view a theory of meaning is no more theoretically interesting than a translation manual. (And isn't any good translation manual compositional in the relevant sense, giving

---

[1] This is essentially a paraphrase of the view advanced by Scott Soames in 'Semantics and Semantic Competence' published in S. Schiffer and S. Steele 1987.

[2] For a possible example of overemphasis see the editorial preface to Evans and McDowell 1976.

the meaning of primitives along with a recursive grammar?) What remaining legitimate philosophical demand for an account of the contents associated with sentences is not met by a translation manual? An account of *how* they come to be related? But that seems to presuppose one or another of the reductive accounts of meaning thrown into disarray by Schiffer. Why should we as philosophers try to look behind the account which says that sentences are related to contents because of the way they are used in speech acts with those contents?

The Minimal assertion constraint on a theory of meaning also implies that no interesting issue of objectivity could be raised by the question which once seemed so important: Is the core of a theory of meaning to be given by a statement of conditions of warranted assertion of the declarative sentences of the language or a statement of the truth conditions of those sentences? For the answer to that question must be trivial. To see this, consider the following pairing of a sentence with its assertion condition:

'Something is F':   We have examined something and satisfied ourselves that it is F or some general theory which we accept suggests that something is F.

This kind of correlation cannot be a pairing of a sentence and a content that could figure in a theory of meaning. For in using in the assertoric mode 'Something is F' we are not thereby asserting that (as opposed to collaterally implicating that) the disjunction on the right is true. To see this, take the case where 'F' is the predicate 'such that no theory we accept bears on its existence and such that it will never be examined'. Though this case admits of a neat illustration, the point is quite general—in using a sentence assertorically we are not thereby *asserting* that the conditions hold that make that use warranted.

This is not to say that a truth-conditional conception of meaning is vindicated in any interesting way. It is just that one could present sentence/content pairings which satisfy the assertion constraint in a truth-conditional package. Since what is important is not the mode of presentation of the pairings but the pairings themselves, we have here no way of raising an interesting issue about realism or objectivity via a question about the form of a theory of meaning. Philosophy of language has no foundational role of the sort once envisaged by Dummett and certain Davidsonians. We must look elsewhere for a way of giving more precise content to the question of the relation between our thought and reality.[3]

---

[3] In the Preface to *Truth and Other Enigmas* Dummett suggests that the issue should be restated in terms of the kind of notion of truth appropriate to some subject matter. Crispin Wright has taken this up and suggested that the anti-realist position should be that truth is epistemically constrained. This has obvious affinities with Hilary Putnam's suggestion that truth is assertibility in epistemically ideal circumstances. The trouble with all these suggestions is that the platitudes governing truth seem to characterize a fairly minimal correspondence notion of truth which has no inherent connection with epistemic notions.

Minimalism about meaning is a deflationary hypothesis about the prospects of philosophy of language, a hypothesis which when properly put to use can help explain why so many programmes which have proffered substantive discoveries about meaning and cognate notions have proved unsuccessful in the variety of ways that Schiffer and others have made evident. So although I may not be in total agreement with Schiffer about the prospects of a compositional clause for attitude sentences, I share his view that the correct theory about meaning would be in a certain sense no theory but a statement of the obvious coupled with resistance to the urge to find a hidden and substantial nature for meaning to have. It goes without saying then that I think we owe him a very great debt in helping us to command a clear view of the negative prospects of so many programmes in the philosophy of language.

Department of Philosophy
Princeton University
Princeton, New Jersey 08544

References

Burge, T. 1986: Individualism and Psychology.*Philosophical Review*, 95, 3–45.
Davidson, D. 1984: *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Dummett, M. 1978: *Truth and Other Enigmas*. London: Duckworth.
Dummett, D. 1976: What is a Theory of Meaning? (II). In G. Evans and J. McDowell (eds), *Truth and Meaning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Field, H. 1979: Tarski's Theory of Truth. *J. Phil*, 69, 347–375.
Fodor, J. 1987: *Psychosemantics*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
G. Evans and J. McDowell (eds), 1976: *Truth and Meaning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Grice, H. P. 1957: Meaning. *Philosophical Review*, 66, 377–388.
Grice, H. P. 1968: Utterer's Meaning, Sentence Meaning and Word Meaning. *Foundations of Language*, 4, 225242.
Grice, H. P. 1969: Utterer's Meaning and Intentions. *Philosophical Review*, 78, 147–177.
Kripke, S. 1980: *Naming and Necessity*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
Quine, W. V. O. 1960: *Word and Object*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
Salmon, N. 1986: *Frege's Puzzle*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
Schiffer, S. 1972: *Meaning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Schiffer, S. and Steele, S. (eds), 1987: *Thought and Language*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.