

Symposium on Remnants of Meaning

By Stephen Schiffer, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987, Pp. xx + 303.

1. Overview of the Book¹

STEPHEN SCHIFFER

I was asked to begin this symposium on my *Remnants of Meaning* with a summary of it, but I felt that I couldn't improve on the one I already gave in the book's Preface. So here, with thanks to MIT Press for permission to reprint it, is that Preface.

In 1957 the then Oxford philosopher H. P. Grice published a short article in the *Philosophical Review* called 'Meaning', in which he did the following:

1. He distinguished the sense of 'meaning' applicable to speakers, as in
In uttering 'Il pleut', Pierre meant that it was raining,
from the sense of 'meaning' applicable to marks and sounds, as in
'La neige est blanche' means that snow is white.
2. He proposed a definition of *speaker-meaning* (as we may call it) that had this feature: if correct, it showed that speaker-meaning could be defined in wholly psychological terms, independently of any other *semantic* notions.
3. He suggested that *expression-meaning*—the meaning of marks and sounds—could then be defined in terms of the defined notion of speaker-meaning, but made no serious effort to show how this could be done.

¹ In June 1987, the meeting of the Society for Philosophy and Psychology included a symposium on my then-forthcoming book, *Remnants of Meaning*, in which Professors Barbara Hall Partee, Norbert Hornstein, and Mark Johnston commented on my book and I responded. The editors of this journal invited publication of the symposium, and the present discussion is the result. I am extremely honored, and flattered, by this attention, and would like to express my thanks and gratitude to Dr Samuel Guttenplan and the other editors of *Mind & Language*, to the organizers (especially Stephen Stich) of the Society for Philosophy and Psychology meeting, and, most of all, to Barbara, Norbert and Mark for their stimulating, provocative, illuminating and incisive comments.

As a graduate student at Oxford in the sixties, I was much taken with Grice's program. I thought that his actual account of speaker-meaning was inadequate (it was best viewed as a first shot at a definition of *telling*); but I was taken with the idea of *reducing* the semantic to the psychological by first defining speaker-meaning in terms of a certain species of intentional behavior whose specification did not itself involve anything semantical, and then defining expression-meaning in terms of the reduced notion of speaker-meaning. In my book *Meaning* (1972) I tried to carry forward the Gricean program, which I now call 'intention-based semantics' (IBS), by offering a more adequate account of speaker-meaning and by showing how expression-meaning and other semantic notions, such as Austin's (1962) notion of an illocutionary act, could be defined in terms of speaker-meaning. However, the account of expression-meaning was in important ways incomplete and, apart from its incompleteness, defective in ways that made it at best a first step in what one might have hoped to be the right direction. So when I finished my book, I regarded the need to provide a complete and fully adequate account of expression-meaning as very much a part of the continuing IBS agenda. At the same time I thought that there were no insuperable obstacles to getting such an account, and was encouraged by work of David Lewis's (1975) to suppose that I knew the lines along which to get it. I thought that the real challenge to the IBS program was the one that I am about to describe. This optimism, I later came to realize, was naive; but this was not something that I could realize until it became clear to me why the challenge just alluded to could not be met.

The IBS program of reducing the semantic to the psychological was attractive to me for several reasons, but one very important reason was this. First, I was a physicalist as regards the semantic and the psychological and felt, with Quine and others, that we could not be assured that there *were* semantic and psychological facts unless it could be shown that these facts were identical to physical or topic-neutral facts—facts, that is, statable in sentences devoid of semantic, mentalistic, and intentional idioms. Second, I felt that the program of reducing the semantic and the psychological to the physical would be considerably aided if we could first reduce the semantic to the psychological. Certainly I felt that the project of defining the semantic in terms of the psychological was fairly pointless if one was then going to view propositional attitudes as primitive and inexplicable. IBS seeks to explain the fact that a certain sequence of sounds means that such and such among a certain population of speakers by virtue of the sequence being correlated with the belief that such and such by communicative practices that prevail in the population. What could be the point of trading in facts about *meaning* for facts about the *content of beliefs* if one ends up with nothing to say about the latter? (Cf. Block 1986).

Both mental states and sentences have what is called *intentionality* or *representational content*: a particular sentence means that *worms do not have noses*, and a particular state is a belief that *worms do not have noses*. What the theorist ultimately wants, of course, is a general theory of content, a

theory of linguistic *and* mental representation. Now in *Meaning* it was argued that all questions about linguistic representation reduce to questions about mental representation, but no attempt was made there to account for mental representation—to account, that is, for the content of mental states. This meant that the IBS program, as I construed it, and as tied to physicalism, would not be complete until an account of propositional attitudes was given that satisfied the following two conditions.

A. It showed, in conformity with the IBS program of *reducing* semantic facts to propositional-attitude facts, that propositional-attitude facts, such as the fact that Ralph believes that worms do not have noses, could in their turn be explicated without recourse to the semantic features of sentences. Here it was assumed that believing was a *relation* to things believed, and the task was to find objects of belief that were consonant with the IBS program. In other words, what entity can *the IBS theorist* take to be the referent of ‘that worms do not have noses’ in the sentence that ascribes to Ralph his belief? This was a substantial challenge, because many philosophers were skeptical of the possibility of accounting for the content of beliefs in a language-independent way.

B. It showed, in conformity with my physicalism, that propositional-attitude facts were facts statable in sentences devoid of mentalistic and intentional idioms.

In the years following the publication of *Meaning* I tried to come up with a theory of propositional attitudes that satisfied these two constraints. But without success. I used to joke that I was able to refute all of the theories compatible with my presuppositions, until one day in 1982 I finally decided that I probably was not joking. Conditions A and B could not be satisfied. But that was not the end of it, was in fact only the beginning. 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 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. It was thus that I came to write *Remnants of Meaning*.

I want now to make explicit the structure and drift of this book.

In chapter 1, ‘Starting Points: The Semantic, the Psychological, and the Physical’, a hypothetical philosopher is implicitly defined by nine hypotheses that he holds, most of which are held in common with many other philosophers. The ‘implicit philosopher’ is pretty close to myself, before reaching philosophical maturity, and the rest of the book in effect traces the steps by which he came to abandon his old views and take on certain

new ones. This autobiographical insight is, however, irrelevant to an understanding of this book, which presupposes no interest whatever in my intellectual development (or its opposite).

The first hypothesis is that there are semantic facts: some marks and sounds have *meaning*, some are *true*, some *refer* to things, and so on.

The second hypothesis is that every natural language has a compositional meaning theory: a finitely statable theory that specifies the meaning of each word and syntactic construction of the language in a way that determines the meaning of every expression of the language.

The third hypothesis is that a correct compositional meaning theory for a language is also a compositional truth-theoretic semantics for the language: that is, it determines a truth condition for every utterance in the language that has one.

The fourth hypothesis gives the reason for supposing that natural languages have compositional semantics: namely, it would not be possible to account for a human's ability to understand utterances of indefinitely many novel sentences of a language without the assumption that the language had a compositional semantics.

The fifth hypothesis corresponds to the first, and is merely that humans have beliefs and other propositional attitudes with content.

The sixth hypothesis expresses the 'token-token identity theory': your present belief that you are reading is a neural state-token of yours.

The seventh hypothesis is what I call the relational theory of propositional attitudes: believing is a relation to things believed, to values of the variable '*y*' in the schema '*x* believes *y*', which things have features that determine the intentional features of beliefs (for instance, my present belief that snow is white is true just in case what I believe—the referent of the singular term 'that snow is white'—is true). Naturally the big question here, which the rest of the book makes much of, is, What are these 'things believed'? Here, too, one is reminded of the connection between the relational theory of propositional attitudes and the hypothesis that every natural language has a compositional semantics: if English has a correct compositional semantics, then 'believes' must be treated in that semantics as a semantic primitive, and it is arguable that the only tenable way this can be done is to treat 'believes' as a relational predicate true of a believer and what he believes.

The eighth hypothesis is that semantic and psychological facts are not irreducibly semantic or psychological, but can be revealed to be facts statable in sentences devoid of semantic, mentalistic, and intentional idioms. This hypothesis goes beyond the token-token physicalism of the sixth hypothesis in its refusal to recognize anything, of any ontological category, that is irreducibly semantic or psychological.

The ninth hypothesis is that the Gricean program, Intention-Based Semantics, is essentially correct, and thus the semantic reduces to the psychological in the style of that program.

Thus our hero, the hypothetical philosopher implicitly defined by these nine hypotheses, accepts the relational theory of belief and so must say

what the objects of belief are. Here, fortunately, it is possible to get an exhaustive partition of the positions in logical space; for whatever the 'objects of belief' are, they must be things that can have truth values and stand in logical relations to one another. Evidently, then, things believed (the values of 'y' in 'x believes y') must either be propositions (of one stripe or another), sentences or utterances of a public language, or formulae in the brain's 'language of thought'. But the philosopher is also an IBS theorist, and this means that he cannot accept that believing is a relation to sentences or utterances of a public language. For on that view it is precisely the *meaning* of the sentence or utterance believed that determines the content of a belief, and this fact would defeat his attempt to reduce the meaning of marks and sounds to propositional-attitude content. The IBS theorist who accepts the relational theory must choose between propositions and mental representations as the objects of belief. But the theorist is also a physicalist in the strong sense of the eighth hypothesis, and this means that, whatever he selects as the relata of propositional-attitude relations, he must show that propositional-attitude facts reduce, on that selection, to facts storable in physicalistic or 'topic-neutral' terms.

In chapter 2, 'Functionalism and Propositions', it is argued that our hero will have a hard time satisfying his physicalism if he opts for propositions as the objects of belief. For if believing is a relation to propositions, then it would seem that *functionalism* is the best way to get a physicalistically creditable account of the belief relation, and in this chapter it is argued that functionalism cannot be correct.

In chapter 3, 'The Real Trouble with Propositions', it is argued that, for reasons that have nothing to do with the mind-body problem, believing cannot be a relation to propositions. For consider Tanya's belief that Gustav is a dog. If the propositionalist theory of believing is correct, then the proposition that provides the complete content of Tanya's belief either contains (so to say) doghood or else contains a mode of presentation of it; but there are arguments to show that neither of these alternatives pans out. The IBS theorist who subscribes to the relational theory of belief must turn to neural sentences of the inner system of mental representation.

In chapter 4, 'Intentionality and the Language of Thought', it is argued that believing cannot be a relation to formulae in a language of thought. The case against that view is overdetermined, but one problem made much of in this chapter is that (a) it does not appear possible to obtain a correct naturalistic account of what determines the truth conditions of Mentalese formulae, and (b) without such a naturalistic account the hypothesis that believing is a relation to neural sentences has no credibility. Of course it is made clear that in rejecting mental representations as the objects of belief one is not thereby rejecting the empirical hypothesis that the brain is an information processor and thus processes in a neural machine language. Since propositional attitudes are relations neither to propositions nor to mental representations, the end of this chapter also concludes that IBS cannot be correct if the relational theory of propositional attitudes is.

At this point we know that if the relational theory of propositional

attitudes is correct, then believing is a relation to a sentence or utterance of a public language, and it is the meaning of the sentence or utterance that determines the content of any belief having that sentence or utterance as its object. In chapter 5, 'Sententialist Theories of Belief', it is argued that no sententialist theory of belief can be correct. It is also argued, as a corollary to the main argument, that no extensionalist account of compositional semantics can be correct. Much of this chapter focuses on Davidson's paratactic theory of propositional-attitude ascriptions.

At the end of this chapter it is clear that the relational theory of propositional attitudes is false, if what has gone before is correct. The falsity of the relational theory, we have already noticed, threatens the hypothesis that every natural language has a correct compositional semantics, and this is the topic of chapter 7. The next chapter deals with the by now evident falsity of physicalism.

Chapter 6, 'Ontological Physicalism and Sentential Dualism', begins with the realization that the physicalism of the eighth of the initial hypotheses cannot be correct: if it is a fact that I believe that worms do not have noses, then that fact is not one statable in nonmentalistic and nonintentional terms. But what is our hero now to do? Is he to accept eliminativism and deny that we have beliefs with content and words with meaning, or, even worse, to renounce the scruples of the natural scientist and 'just surface listlessly to the Sargasso Sea of mentalism' (Quine 1975, p. 91)? Neither, I maintain: we can find a way between eliminativism and dualism by denying the existence of genuinely objective, language-independent belief properties (believing that such and such, being a belief that such and such) and facts. This nominalism then allows one to embrace both Ontological Physicalism, the thesis that there are no extralinguistic irreducibly psychological entities of any ontological category, and Sentential Dualism, the thesis that there are true but irreducible belief-ascribing sentences. In arguing for this solution to the mind-body problem, 'token-token physicalism' (the sixth of the initial hypotheses) is tentatively accepted, and the solution is brought to bear on, and to solve, the paradox Kripke (1982) has located in the work of Wittgenstein.

In chapter 7, 'Compositional Semantics and Language Understanding', I turn to a tension that has existed since the conclusion of chapter 5. On the one hand, it would appear that if, as many suppose, natural languages have compositional truth-theoretic semantics, then the relational theory of propositional attitudes must be correct; while, on the other hand, I have argued that the relational theory is false. I must therefore deny that the relational construal of 'believes' is required by its accommodation within a compositional semantics, or else deny that natural languages have compositional semantics. I opt for the latter course. I do not think that there is any better way of treating propositional-attitude verbs in compositional semantics, but argue in this chapter that the reason usually given for supposing that natural languages have compositional semantics—viz., that it would not otherwise be possible to explain language understanding (the fourth of the initial hypotheses)—is not a good reason. I describe a possible world in which a certain person, Harvey, understands spoken English, but

in which, thanks to the 'conceptual roles' of certain expressions in his neural *lingua mentis*, the complete explanation of his language understanding ability does not presuppose that the language he understands has a compositional semantics.

Chapter 8, 'Compositional Semantics, Meaning Theories, and Ontology', is a continuation of the preceding chapter, and in it the following two questions are considered. First, let it be granted that compositional semantics is not needed to explain language understanding. Might it not be needed for some other reason—say, just to explain how the semantic features of a sentence depend on those of its parts? Second, let it be granted that natural languages do not have compositional truth-theoretic semantics. Might they not nevertheless have finitely storable meaning theories that are not compositional truth-theoretic semantics, a meaning theory for a particular language being a theory that 'explicitly states something knowledge of which would suffice for interpreting utterances of speakers of the language to which it applies' (Davidson 1984, p. 171)? Both questions are answered negatively, and a lengthy discussion of Michael Dummett's anti-realism and verificationist semantics figures into the discussion of the second. In the chapter's last section an important connection is forged between my nominalism and my denial of compositional semantics.

In chapter 9, 'Intention-Based Semantics and the Analysis of Meaning', I return to that which, in its way, began this whole discussion. After reviewing the nature of the IBS program and problems with its account of speaker-meaning, I try to explain its failure to account for expression-meaning, the meaning of marks and sounds. It turns out that not only does an IBS account of expression-meaning presuppose semantic compositionality and the relational theory of propositional attitudes, but it also presupposes that understanding utterances is an inferential process of a certain dubious sort. It is this last presupposition that requires the IBS account of expression-meaning to require language users to have propositional knowledge which they seem pretty clearly not to have. In the end the whole business of 'analysis' is disparaged.

Now the patient reader wants to know what my theory of meaning and intentionality is. What is the correct, positive theory of meaning and content that is to take the place of those against which I have argued? In chapter 10, 'The No-Theory Theory of Meaning', I give my answer: There is none. Given the conclusions already reached in this book, there is nothing (at least nothing that has not already been given) that could count as a correct theory of meaning or content. The questions that now define the philosophy of language have false presuppositions. The no-theory theory of meaning is not a defeatist program; I am less certain if it is not despairing.

*Philosophy Department
University of Arizona
Tucson, Arizona 85721*

References

- Austin, J. 1962: *How to do things with words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Block, N. 1986: Advertisement for a Semantics for Psychology. In P. French, T. Uehling and H. Wettstein (eds), *Midwest Studies in Philosophy, volume 10*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Davidson, D. 1984: *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kripke, S. 1982: *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Lewis, D. 1983: *Philosophical Papers, Vol. 1*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Quine, W. V. O. 1975: Mind and Verbal Dispositions. In S. Guttenplan (ed.), *Mind and Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schiffer, S. 1972: *Meaning*. Oxford University Press.