What We Tend to Mean

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In this paper a dispositional account of meaning is offered. Words might dispose towards a particular or 'literal' meaning, but whether this meaning is actually conveyed when expressed will depend on a number of factors, such as speaker's intentions, the context of the utterance and the background knowledge of the hearer. It is thus argued that no meaning is guaranteed or necessitated by the words used.

Reconciling word meaning with radical contextualism

To what degree is meaning determined by our words and to what degree is it determined by context? On the one hand, there is literalism,[1] the view that words and sentences express literal meaning that they bring with them into every context in which they are used. A well-formed sentence will on this view have a fixed set of truth conditions, determined by the words together with their reference and syntax. This has been the orthodox view among ideal-language philosophers and formal semanticists in the tradition of Frege, Russell, Carnap, Tarski and the early Wittgenstein. A contemporary and sophisticated version of literalism is the semantic minimalism of Cappelen and Lepore.[2] A challenge for literalism is how to

flesh out, expand or complete a sentence so that it can be assigned a truth-value without relying on context at all. Opposed to literalism is contextualism: the view that context is decisive for all meaning (also truth conditional meaning).[3] Ordinary language philosophers such as Austin, Strawson and the later Wittgenstein are typically considered to hold forms of contextualism. In its most radical form, meaning is taken to be entirely determined by context, a view that is mainly held by followers of the later Wittgenstein.[4] This leaves little room for a notion of literal meaning, since all meaning would be ultimately sensitive to context. A sentence might then be thought to express one particular meaning in one context, but a completely different meaning in a different context.

We could have prima facie worries about both contextualism and literalism. If meaning is determined entirely by context, then what words we choose to use seems to make no difference. Meaning becomes a matter of pure contingency: any word or sentence could mean anything. On literalism, however, our words are thought to carry with them some meaning in virtue of themselves. The use of certain words would seem to necessitate a particular meaning, no matter the context in which they are uttered, who utters them, or to whom they are uttered.

Still, there are some plausible intuitions to be found in both positions. In this paper we attempt to reconcile the intuition that our words have a core of meaning with the basic idea of radical contextualism. Our suggestion is that we understand meaning as fundamentally dispositional: context sensitive, complex and flexible. Our words might tend towards a particular meaning, so they cannot mean just whatever, but they do not ne-

cessitate a meaning either. There could always be some context in which the words meant something different. Thus we can have a core of meaning, towards which a word disposes, while allowing that whether the word attains that meaning is still nevertheless dependent on context of use. Words and sentences can tend towards a particular meaning, but tending towards x is compatible with x not being realised. The following offers the outlines of a dispositional theory of meaning. If successful, dispositionalism could explain two plausible but seemingly conflicting intuitions: 1) that our words have a core of meaning that they bring with them into every context, and 2) that all meaning is sensitive to context.

Several features of dispositions (also called powers or causal powers) seem to apply to meaning. This paper is not intended to present a full-fledged theory of meaning, however. Our aim is to show what a dispositional perspective can bring with it to the debate on words, their meaning and context. We advance the thesis that the connection between a word and its meaning can usefully be understood as a dispositional connection. Several features of dispositions, properly understood, seem to apply to meanings. We will here draw attention to some features of dispositionality that we take to be particularly useful for this purpose. These are complexity, pleiotropy, context-sensitivity and compositionality.[5]

Words dispose towards meaning

Our starting point is to draw an analogy between the connection of a word to its meaning and a cause to its effect. In a recently developed position that we call causal dispositionalism, the latter connection is taken to

be of dispositional modal force.[6] A disposition is something that tends, and no more than tends, towards a manifestation. We have argued elsewhere that dispositionality is an irreducible form of modality that is weaker than necessity, but stronger than mere contingency.[7] Dispositionality is more than pure contingency because a disposition is for a distinct manifestation or outcome rather than all the many other possibilities. A disposition 'selects' a subset of all the mere possibilities as its manifestation type. Hence the manifestation of solubility is in being dissolved and the manifestation of fragility is in being broken. But the modal connection between the disposition and manifestation is weaker than necessity since the manifestation can be prevented or interfered with by counteracting powers. We have argued that a theory of causation that is based on an ontology of powers should employ precisely this modal notion.[8] It takes us back to a view of nature, found in Aristotle and Aquinas,[9] in which tendency is a key notion rather than either necessitation or unrestricted contingency.

Consider the following example. Smoking disposes towards cancer. But we know that not everyone who smokes gets cancer. That there is a real disposition towards the disease is not falsified by there being some instances of smoking without subsequent cancer, which it would be on a constant conjunction view of causation for instance. There are various reasons we have for believing that there is such a tendency, despite the lack of absolute regularity. It might be revealed in statistics, for instance, if the incidence of cancer is higher among smokers than non-smokers who are comparable for other factors. We might, on the other hand, have biological evidence: an understanding of the bodily mechanisms that lead from tobacco usage to cancer. The relation between smoking and cancer is therefore not purely accidental. But it is not purely necessary either. Whether someone who smokes actually develops cancer is dependent upon many factors: some that dispose towards cancer and some that dispose away from cancer. This is why the actual development of cancer will be a context-sensitive matter. A person might be genetically predisposed for cancer, having a biology in which it is more likely that tobacco will have its effect, or they might live in a polluted city, exposed to other carcinogens. These factors dispose towards cancer. But an active lifestyle and healthy diet are factors that typically dispose away from cancer. To understand why a carcinogen manifests its power in some but not all cases, therefore, we need to understand that exposure occurs in different contexts in which different factors combine.

We can model the kind of situation that concerns us in a diagram (fig. 1), where each factor is represented as a vector that either disposes towards or away from a certain outcome, with varying intensities indicated by the vector's length.[10] Now if we take a, b and c to be the factors disposing towards cancer (the having of cancer being indicated by F), and d and e to be the factors disposing away from cancer (indicated by G), then the overall tendency is still towards F; towards cancer. The resultant vector R is represented by a thicker line and is calculated in this case by addition and subtraction of the individual vectors.
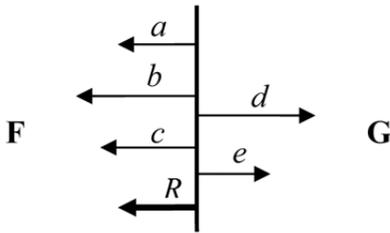
Figure 1: A vector diagram modelling causal powers

Even the resultant vector *R*, on this account, is also just a tendency towards which the overall situation is directed. *R* represents what we can call a resultant power and, like individual powers, it tends, but no more than tends, towards an outcome. If a doctor sees that her patient is at risk of developing cancer, effectively making the kind of assessment we represent in the vector diagram, she will try to counteract the process before it has manifested itself. The doctor might suggest that the patient quit smoking, in which case the overall situation might no longer dispose towards cancer. Or she might recommend more of something she believes disposes away from cancer, as some believe fruit and vegetables do. In the first case, the effect is counteracted by removing one of the tendencies towards it: the smoking of cigarettes. We could call this subtractive interference. In the second case, the effect is counteracted by adding something that disposes away from it, such as vitamins. We might call this additive interference. An interferer might be strong enough, in a particular situation, to stop an effect from occurring at all, in which case we call it a preventer.

There is much more that can be said about the dispositional theory of causation,[11] but our purpose here is to apply this notion of a dispositional modality to the case of meaning. If words are compared with dispositions and meanings with their manifestations, a number of helpful insights follow that will, we venture, allow us to reconcile some notion of literal meaning with a significant degree of contextualism. We start with the polygeny and pleiotropy of meaning.

Polygeny and pleiotropy

Following Molnar we take effects to be polygenic; produced by a number of powers in combination.[12] An acorn can grow into a tree, but in order for it to do so it would need soil, light, heat and water. An effect is thus some sort of manifestation, but one that could not be produced by a single power alone. An effect – something happening in the world – can thus be understood as a joint manifestation of many powers working together.

Meanings are typically polygenic. The meaning of a sentence is produced by the coming together of many words and is almost always one that none of the individual words could have produced alone. This is a kind of compositionality but, as we will see later, one that is best understood as non-linear and non-additive. The individual words of a sentence will have their meanings partly decided by which other words accompany them in that sentence. This is most clear for a so-called homonym: a word that has multiple meanings (or different words with the same spelling or pronunciation). Examples of homonyms are 'bow', 'coach', 'present', and 'stalk'. When a homonym appears in a sentence, the sentence context might help push it towards a particular meaning. For the word 'present', for instance, the sentence 'He gave me a present' will push towards a different meaning from 'Could you present

your results?' or 'Everyone was present at the meeting'. But for other homonyms the meaning might not be so clear even by looking at the sentence as a whole. 'Are you going to the bank?' is an example of this kind, where it would mean something different if directed at a man rowing in a boat on a river than if directed at a shopkeeper leaving the shop with a bag of money. Here the meaning of the word will be determined not only by sentence context but essentially by the extra-linguistic context in which the sentence is uttered. We can see that what was said of homonyms can be extended to the meaning of all words. Homonyms merely show that context is required to distinguish two or more core meanings but once that is accepted we can also see that there is no reason why it is only homonyms that are sensitive to context. There is nothing particularly special about homonyms. All words seem capable of changes in meaning.

The polygeny of meaning suggests that although a word might dispose towards one particular meaning, whether it acquires that meaning or instead another is determined not only by the word itself, but also by context. We have said that this could be sentence context – the other words that surround it and jointly compose a sentence – but it also could be the extra-linguistic context in which it is uttered. The word 'pass' can dispose towards a core meaning, such as to pass a tree. But its meaning can be altered by extra-linguistic context: the situation in which it is uttered. 'To pass water' might mean travelling past a lake. But it could also mean passing in another sense, for instance, urinating. The meaning will thus differ if uttered by a nurse holding a cup or by a man holding a map. And if someone is asked to pass some water at the dinner table, this would normally mean something

else as well. These examples are all extra-linguistic contexts that can determine different meanings for lexically indistinguishable sentences.

While an effect is produced by many causal factors, each of these individual factors could in their turn contribute to the production of many different effects, dependent on with which other factors they were combined. Molnar calls this feature pleiotropy. The power of heat, for instance, can combine with a number of other powers, and what effect it produces will depend on what the other powers are and how they compose. In combination with water, heat can produce steam, but if combined with sand it could produce glass. It can also produce high pressure, expansion, explosion, energy, melting, sweat, drought, fever, death, life, and so on. There is no reason to think that this list is finite.

Words seem to be pleiotropic in this sense. They can combine in a variety of ways to produce infinitely many sentences and meanings. Homonyms are the clearest cases. A homonym is a word with explicit multiple meanings. It might be likened to a so-called multiply manifested disposition. But contextualism tells us that all words can have more or less subtle changes of meaning according to context. A word or phrase might dispose towards a particular meaning but be used in different ways in different contexts. The example of passing water shows how much meaning can change. 'Water' is not explicitly a homonym but according to context may for instance mean pure H_2O or even urine. There seems no reason in principle why any word could not be in a context that diverted it away from what we might think of as its core or semantic meaning. This would be the equivalent for causa-

tion of saying that any possible effect can be prevented or interfered with.

Given polygeny and pleiotropy, the possibility of ambiguity need not represent a problem for meaning. Rather, the fact that words can have more than one meaning points to their flexible and adaptive nature. If we understand word meaning as dispositional rather than literal, a word can still dispose towards a particular meaning without necessitating it. There can be a stronger or weaker tendency towards a meaning. The word 'cup' might dispose more toward meaning a drinking device than it disposes towards meaning a sporting trophy. But none of these meanings, no matter how strong the disposition, are guaranteed by the word alone. And while words and sentences add to the production of meaning, so does the context in which they are used. We will now try to justify this more.

Manifest meaning

Any change in context could affect and alter the meaning of a sentence. We saw with the example 'passing water' that this could mean different things in different contexts. The question is what meaning the context can change, or how much context could influence meaning. Grice has shown how plausible it is to think of meaning on various levels, where some meaning is sensitive to context (conversational implicatures) while others are not (what is said).[13] So couldn't there be some core of literal or conventional meaning that is kept constant, while some further meaning is added by context? If so, any change in meaning would only be a change in implicatures. Indeed, one of the motivations behind a distinction between semantics and pragmatics is the Gricean intuition that our words convey some meaning on their own, independently of the particular context in which they are used. On radical contextualism, however, no word or sentence can convey meaning if taken in isolation, since all meaning is ultimately sensitive to context.

Contextualism sits well with dispositionalism. Even though a disposition tends towards a particular manifestation, whether it will actually manifest is always a matter of context-sensitivity. The flammability of a match cannot guarantee that the match will burn. In order for it to do so, it needs to be struck, for instance. But it also needs presence of oxygen and dryness of the wood. This is the polygenic nature of causation; that all effects are made up by many factors working together. But as we saw in the vector diagram above (fig. 1), there could always be added some factor that disposed away from the effect, hence preventing the effect from occurring. There could for instance be a strong wind so that the match couldn't light. So in one context the flammable match, the dry wood, the oxygen and the striking might actually produce the effect of the match lighting. But in a context where there is also wind they might fail to produce the same effect. Applying this idea to the case of language suggests that the Gricean view is incorrect as no meaning is guaranteed to remain unchanged in every context. No meaning is entirely insensitive to context.

Our words might dispose towards a particular meaning, but what meaning gets conveyed is still dependent on the context in which they appear. When someone says 'Do you know what time it is', we might want to say that taken literally, this would be a request for a time report. But surely this is just because we think of a certain type of context in which such sentences are uttered, namely

when someone wants to know the time. But this is not a meaning that the sentence carries with it into every context in the sense that it guarantees this particular meaning. If addressed to someone who is late for an important meeting, for instance, it might be a way to comment on the belated arrival by drawing their attention to the time.

That no meaning is insensitive to context is thus consistent with allowing that words have meanings to which they dispose: and sometimes strongly dispose. The word 'love', for instance, might dispose strongly towards the feeling of affection. But it could also dispose toward meaning a certain tennis score, although with much smaller intensity. The context might push the meaning in one or other direction. We could illustrate a word's contribution to meaning in a vector diagram, where the intensity to which it disposes towards that particular meaning is indicated by the length of the vector (fig. 2). Words that dispose towards particular meanings with a greater intensity than they do to other meanings, will then make a bigger contribution to meaning than for instance homonyms, which could tend towards a variety of meanings. But there might still be some contextual factor that disposed away from this meaning and prevented the word from manifesting it.
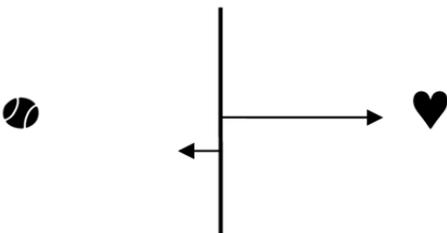

Figure 2: The tendencies of the word 'love'

Even in a sentence context where 'love' refers to the emotion rather than a tennis score there is still a question of exactly what is meant. Even subtle differences of context can produce large differences of meaning. Bach notices how the sentence 'I love you too' can carry different meanings simply by emphasizing different words.[14] The first meaning we might think of is the returning of the feeling: 'I love you *too*'. But it could also be that someone loves more than one person, as in 'I love *you* too', or more than one person who loves someone: '*I* love you too'. Or there could be more than one feeling involved: 'I *love* you too'. But if we now also consider factors such as facial expressions and tone of voice, we might find that the sentence is uttered with sarcasm or irony.

But could a sentence such as 'I love you' really mean anything at all if we just found an appropriate context? This seems to be a consequence of radical contextualism. Could there for instance be some context in which it meant 'I want some peanut butter'? Why not? All we need is a setting where someone says 'If you want some peanut butter, say that you love me'. If the answer is 'I love you', then the most natural interpretation of that sentence is 'I want some peanut butter'. But again this can only be a disposition and not something that is guaranteed by the words together with this particular context. There could always be something that was added to the context that changed the meaning again. It might for instance be that the person saying 'I love you' says it to another person than the one holding the peanut butter. In this case, saying 'I love you' is not what the peanut butter holder requested.

Can sentences be intrinsically nonsense?

Some sentences seem not to carry any meaning at all and are thus a stiff test of the credentials of contextualism for they would suggest that meaning (or lack of) was a matter intrinsic to the words. A number of philosophers believe that nonsense can be attributed to sentences.[15] A sentence could be nonsense for many reasons. A famous example was suggested by Chomsky: 'Colourless green ideas sleep furiously'.[16] Here we have a string of words that carry meaning individually but which seems semantically defective as a whole. Another type of nonsense could be sentences that contain one or more words that have no meaning but are otherwise syntactically well-formed. An example of this is 'Scott kept a runcible at Abbotsford', attributed to G. E. Moore.[17] A third type of nonsense is a sentence construction that involves so-called category mistakes, as in 'Caesar is a prime number', proposed by Carnap.[18] Since being a prime number is a predicate, not of humans but of numbers, and Caesar is not a number, Carnap concludes that this sentence can neither be true nor false and must therefore be nonsensical.[19]

We agree that there are nonsensical uses of such sentences, that is, where they do not carry any meaning. But the context-sensitivity of meaning suggests that there could be some context where they did carry meaning. Take Carnap's example:

(N) Caesar is a prime number.

We normally think of 'Caesar' as referring to the historical figure who was the founder of Imperial Rome and we normally think of 'x is a prime number' as being part of an arithmetic statement, such as '53 is a prime number'. In fact, there might be strong tendencies towards these meanings. But this does not mean that there could not possibly be a context in which sentence N had meaning. Hertzberg suggests an example of such a context where the setting is a conversation between two judges at a dog show:[20]

A: 'What are the prime contenders in this class?'

B: 'Well, Caesar is a prime number.'

A: 'Which one is that?'

B: 'It's number 53.'

A: 'Yes, you're right of course, 53 really is a prime number.'

Hertzberg's example is particularly illustrative for dispositionalism about meaning. Not only does it provide a context in which N makes good sense and 'Caesar is a prime number' does not involve any category mistake. But Hertzberg's example also provides a context in which the sentence '53 is a prime number' is not used to make an arithmetic statement.[21]

In lack of a specific context we seem inclined to interpret sentences in some 'standard' or conventional way. There may be a default meaning for certain words or sentences, where it would require some factor in a context to move a word away from its default meaning. But we should not be tempted to infer from this that the default is the literal meaning of the sentences as that would imply that nothing could prevent the sentence from conveying that meaning. If an interpretation seems standard or the default in a particular context, it is probably because it is the most conventional way of expressing exactly this meaning in exactly this type of context. The literalist would be in the same position as the necessitarian about

causation who says that whenever a cause of a certain type occurs, an effect of a certain type occurs. We have said in response that all natural processes can be prevented with an additive interferer. Similarly, if literalism were true, then whenever a certain word or sentence was used, it would have to have a certain meaning. But we suggest that in every natural language, meaning can deviate from the default according to context. Contextual factors are thus the additive interferers for meanings.

No word must always have a particular meaning; and each word could always have a different meaning. Nonsense provides the sternest test of this but, as we have argued, no sentence is ever intrinsically nonsensical, even sentences that seem syntactically garbled. Think of how SMS language has developed. 'LOL', 'C U L8r', 'I <3 U' and ':-P' may have seemed nonsensical, but they now all convey meaning in the context of internet chat rooms. Acronyms, emoticons, and creative abbreviations were developed for reasons of efficiency and economy in communication via mobile phones. We empower such terms with meanings as part of our social practices so whether something is or isn't nonsense will be a relative, that is contextual, matter.

What this shows is that meaning is not something that is stipulated by the dictionary. Quite the contrary: the dictionary will reflect and report a range of uses of words and phrases. It is descriptive of the meanings we give to words in their active use. Meanings develop and change over time, and different communities might use a word or sentence construction in different ways. While 'PVC' didn't used to have much common meaning until the development of the plastic material polyvinyl chloride, this is now a standard way to refer to this type of vinyl. Again, what is taken as standard meaning is a matter of convention and context. In British universities, for example, 'PVC' is the normal way to refer to a Pro-Vice Chancellor, not vinyl, and a 'VC' is the Vice Chancellor, not a Venture Capitalist.

Dispositionalism can explain why we would be inclined to say that some sentences are nonsense, or devoid of meaning. We can compare 'nonsense' sentences with weak or low-probability dispositions. These are dispositions that carry low probability of ever manifesting. An example would be a fair coin's disposition to land heads in 99 out of 100 tosses. This is not a very likely outcome, but there is a very remote possibility that it could happen: an extremely weak disposition for it. That a disposition does not in fact manifest does not mean that there could not be a context in which it does. Similarly for any sentence construction, there could be some circumstance in which it has meaning. No matter how garbled, there could be a situation in which it carried meaning. It is 'just' a matter of finding the right context.

Do words have intrinsic meaning?

Given the discussion of nonsense, we might ask whether any word or sentence can carry meaning on its own; that is, intrinsically. If a sentence cannot express nonsense just in virtue of itself, it seems to follow that it cannot express sense or meaning purely in virtue of itself either. There could always be some context in which an otherwise meaningful sentence could be used to express nonsense or even asserted as nonsense. In order for our words or sentences to carry meaning, therefore, they must be used in a context where they actually mean something. Any

sentence, in contrast, can be used as a non sequitur.

If correct, then words and sentences do not have intrinsic meaning. Whether some particular sentence is meaningful or nonsense is not an intrinsic matter. One might instead think it more plausible that meaning is something that can only be created, conveyed and grasped by minds, rather than having a platonic existence that is independent of whether someone ever grasps it. It would then be us as language users who empower words with meaning. So even though the words do not give any meaning in themselves, they do contribute to meaning because they are so empowered (by us).

We can illuminate this idea by comparing it with Martin's notion of reciprocity. For any disposition, he says, there is a network of powers that when combined in different ways will create different manifestations.[22] He calls these reciprocal dispositions, or mutual manifestation partners. Examples of such partners are not hard to find. Martin refers to Locke's example of the key and the lock that are both needed for the locking and unlocking. And while a match is flammable, it needs its reciprocal partners to light: the oxygen, the striking, the dry wood, and so on. Meaning seems to be something like a mutual manifestation between words, context and minds. These factors will all be causes of meaning, but none of these would be able to produce meaning on their own.[23]

Nonlinear composition and holism

There is a final comparison that can be made between causal dispositionalism and meaning which concerns compositionality. Language users can understand infinitely many new sentences, which might be used as an argument for the theory that the meaning of a sentence is composed from the meaning of its parts, the words. As long as one understands the component words, and the sentence is constructed using the appropriate rules of composition for the language, then one can understand any sentence generated from them. This is a Fregean view of meaning, and one we could call atomistic. For any sentence construction that is a so-called well-formed formula (semantically, syntactically and logically), if the parts of the sentence have meaning, then the sentence as a whole has meaning.

But on the dispositional view that has been developed, it is not clear that the only way in which words compose is by simple addition and subtraction. Should we allow other modes of composition besides? We have a model of compositional pluralism from the causal parallel that has been developed.[24] There are many causal cases in which powers compose in non-linear ways. As a simple example, we can see that money causes happiness in a non-linear fashion. If one moves from having very little money to having an average amount, it can have a very big effect on levels of happiness. But if one is already a millionaire and one then doubles one's wealth, it is unlikely to double one's happiness. Indeed there can be cases where happiness decreases with additional wealth. Similarly, there is a causal connection between body weight and ill-health but it is a non-linear one. If one is very light or very heavy it can lead to ill-health while being in the mid-range doesn't.

One thing that happens in some non-linear cases of causation is that the components begin to interact. The causal factors behave differently when they are alone than when they are operating together. For compari-

son, consider a conversation between two people at a party. As more guests arrive and more conversations begin, the first two guests have to start talking louder to hear each other. But then all the other guests in all the other conversations also have to talk louder. The result is that the total sound volume of the room is higher than the mere addition of what it would have been if all of the conversations had been conducted in isolation. The nature of the conversations, specifically their sound level, gets affected by the fact they are occurring against a certain background.

In the case of meanings, we can see that the notion of non-linear composition also has application. An atomist depicts the situation as if each word brings its meaning to the sentence and retains that same meaning once it is in that sentence (and by extension, one could say the same of groups of sentences out of which longer texts are composed). But this would be akin to each conversation remaining at its original volume once it has been placed into a noisy room. Rather, when words enter a sentence they can in a sense interact, affecting each other's meaning. 'Water' may have a default meaning of H_2O, for instance, but the word can appear in a sentence where its meaning alters, such as: 'The patient has not passed water since waking from the operation'. This sentence certainly is composed of words, but such composition is not merely the addition of fixed meanings of the components. Any such composition is non-linear is the sense that the whole is not merely the addition of the parts. Each word disposes towards a core meaning but some of the words cannot manifest that meaning because of the other words around them. The words become interfer-

ers for each other. In rejecting linear composition, one is thus favouring holism over atomism. We have to look at the whole sentence to grasp the meaning of the individual words, rather than vice versa. Of course, there could be no whole unless there were parts that form it, but the holistic thesis is one concerning meaning priority rather than the existence of the sentence.

There could be a concern with holism over how there is any stability to meaning if the meaning of each word is at least in part given by the other words around it. Each of those surrounding words also gets its meaning in relation to its partners so it might be wondered how there is any meaning at all. If each partner in a sentence has meaning only relative to all the others, isn't meaning a circular matter? We allow that it is but that this is not a fatal flaw. We are acquainted with the idea of meanings as being interdefinable. The dictionary is of course one big circular system in that every word is defined in terms of other words. We are nevertheless able to understand language and this is in part because we are engaged with the world to which we refer in that language.

The final reckoning

We have now assembled enough to conclude in favour of some version of dispositionalism as a way to reconcile basic intuitions from literalism and contextualism.

Literalism is right in so far as words can have distinct or core meanings. This means that they are 'for' certain meanings rather than others out of all those possible. The meaning of a word is not, therefore, a matter of pure contingency. But whether in a certain sentence they attain that meaning is a context sensitive matter, just as a disposi-

tion can be for a certain manifestation but fail to realise it. Contextualism is right, therefore, in that it is not a matter of necessity that the word 'manifests' its core meaning. It may be a default matter that it does so but there will be many situations in which contextual factors deflect it from its default meaning. In comparison, a particular causal power can be turned away from its typical manifestation. The events that occur in our world are usually the result of many powers working together to produce something polygenically that they could not have produced alone. Similarly, words can compose to mean something together that they did not have the power to mean alone. And we should be as liberal about the mode of composition for sentences as we are for modes of composition of causes. We should not assume that words are atoms that simply add up to form sentences. The meanings of the individual words can change according to the surrounding words and wider context of occurrence.

Dispositionalism denies the literalist view in which meanings are necessitated by words but accepts its contention that meaning is not arbitrary and purely contingent. It denies the radical contextualist view in which meaning is entirely determined by context while allowing that all meaning is nevertheless sensitive to context. As we know from the philosophy of dispositions, however, to allow that a disposition's manifestation is a context-sensitive matter is not to deny that the disposition is there at all. For realists about dispositions, the disposition can be present whether it is manifested or not. A glass is fragile even if it does not break and a woman can be fertile even if she never bears offspring. Whether a disposition manifests is a matter of the context in which it is situ-

ated. And, similarly, if we say that the connection between a word and its meaning is a dispositional one, then we can say that words have certain core meanings even if they are unable to manifest those meanings in every context. As contextualists allow, different contexts can change such meanings. But the fact that a word manifests itself differently because of its context is not, for a dispositionalist, a denial that there was a disposition towards some original core meaning. There can be some degree of contextual determination of meaning and some degree of non-contextual determination. The best way to characterise this kind of non-necessitating determination is as dispositional.

Dispositionalism thus allows a partial reconciliation of literalism and contextualism. And it does so without making any commitment to a number of widely held Gricean assumptions. Dispositionalism does not for instance commit us to there being a basic level of meaning, such as Grice's *what is said*. Nor does it commit us to saying that any part of language has truth conditions that are truth functionally determined. While Grice assumed that all meaning that was not explicitly or contextually cancellable would be part of some truth-conditional and literal meaning, dispositionalism instead suggests that all meaning is contextually cancellable.[25] There is no level of meaning that can remain untouched by context. If meaning is a mutual manifestation of words, context and minds, there is no point in even trying to isolate some meaning that can be conveyed by one of these alone.

The benefit of dispositionalism is to explain plausible intuitions of both literalism and contextualism. But perhaps more important is the upshot that dispositionalism

avoids a number of problems commonly associated with issues such as ambiguity, indexicals, category mistakes, lack of reference and nonsense. In dispositionalism, our words become flexible and adaptive rather than ambiguous. They will have meaning, but no meaning that is fixed or determined independent of context. This means that indexicals such as 'I', 'here' and 'now' are not unique in being sensitive to context. All words are. But as long as there is an appropriate context, our words can carry meaning. And this includes words and proper names that allegedly lack reference. To speak of the king of France, Father Christmas, Hamlet or even angels should therefore cause us no worries. Unless we are some sophisticated philosopher of language, we tend to mean something with all our words.

Noter

1 The term 'literalism' is taken from Recanati, François. *Literal Meaning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2004, chapter 6.

2 Cappelen, Herman & Lepore, Ernest. *Insensitive Semantics*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing 2005.

3 There are of course many versions of contextualism and a more detailed discussion of these is found in Recanati 2004, especially in chapter 6.

4 See for instance Cavell, Stanley. *Must We Mean What We Say*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1976; Hertzberg, Lars. «The Sense is Where You Find it». In: McCarthy, T. & Stidd, S. (eds): *Wittgenstein in America*. Oxford: Clarendon Press 2001; Segerdahl, Pär. *Language Use*. London: MacMillan 1996.

5 We of course acknowledge that some may be sceptical that there are any meanings at all or that words need meanings in addition to their reference, or indeed whether meaning is nothing more than reference. If one is to retain a notion of meaning at all, however, we think that dispositionalism is the best way of understanding how words relate to those meanings.

6 Mumford, Stephen & Anjum, Rani. *Getting Causes from Powers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming.

7 Mumford, Stephen & Anjum, Rani. «Dispositional Modality». In: Gethmann, C.F. (ed.) *Lebenswelt und Wissenschaft: Deutsches Jahrbuch Philosophie 3, XXI Deutscher Kongress für Philosophie 2*, Hamburg: Meiner Verlag 2010, pp. 380–94.

8 Mumford & Anjum 2011 and forthcoming, chapter 8.

9 Geach, Peter T. «Aquinas», in Anscombe, G. E. M. and Geach, P. T.: *Three Philosophers*. Oxford: Blackwell 1961.

10 Mumford, Stephen & Anjum, Rani. «Double Prevention and Powers». In: *Journal of Critical Realism*, 2009 (8), pp. 227–239.

11 For a more detailed ouline of the theory of causal dispositionalism, see Mumford & Anjum, forthcoming.

12 Molnar, George. *Powers*. Mumford, Stephen (ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press 2003, pp. 194–5.

13 Grice, Paul. «Logic and Conversation». In: Cole, P. & Morgan, J. (eds.) *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Act*s. New York: Academia Press 1975, pp. 41–58.

14 Bach, Kent. «Conversational Impliciture». In: *Mind and Language*. 1994 (9), nr. 2, pp. 124–162.

15 See for instance Carnap, Rudolph. «The Elimination of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language». In: Sarkar, Sahotra (ed.): *Logical Empiricism at its Peak*. New York: Garland Pub. 1996; Chomsky, Noam. *Syntactic Structures*. The Hague: Mouton 1957; Diamond, Cora. *The Realistic Spirit*, Cambridge MA: The MIT Press 1991; Russell, Bertrand. «Mathematical Logic as Based on the Theory of Types». In: *American Journal of Mathematics*, 1908 (30), pp. 222–262; Ryle, Gilbert. «Categories». In: *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1938 (38), pp. 189–206; Strawson, P. F. *Introduction to Logical Theory*. London: Methuen 1952; Wittgenstein, Ludwig.

Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1922.

16 Chomsky 1957, p. 15.

17 Diamond 1991, pp. 95–6.

18 Carnap 1932, section 4.

19 See also Hacker, P. M. S. «Wittgenstein, Carnap and the New American Wittgensteinians», In: *Philosophical Quarterly*. 2003 (53), pp. 1–23.

20 Hertzberg 2001, p. 92–93.

21 For a recent defence of the view that so-called category mistakes can have meaning, see Magidor, Ofra. «Category Mistakes as Meaningful». In: *Linguistics and Philosophy*. 2010 (32), pp. 553–581.

22 Martin, Charlie B. *The Mind in Nature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008, p. 87.

23 It is outside the scope of this paper to explain how exactly words come to be empowered with meaning. For a starting point, however, we refer the reader to Putnam, Hilary. «The Meaning of 'Meaning'». In: *Mind, Language and Reality: Philosophical Papers* II. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1975.

24 Mumford and Anjum, *Getting Causes from Powers*, chapter 4.

25 These assumptions are taken mainly from the papers «Logic and Conversation», «Further Notes on Logic and Conversation» and «Indicative Conditionals» in: Grice, Paul. *Studies in the Way of Words*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1989.