

‘In Defence of Sententialism’

Giulia FELAPPI[†]

ABSTRACT

Propositional attitude sentences, such as

- (1) Pierre believes that snow is white,

have proved to be formidably difficult to account for in a semantic theory. It is generally agreed that the that-clause ‘that snow is white’ purports to refer to the proposition *that snow is white*, but no agreement has been reached on what this proposition is. Sententialism is a semantic theory which tries to undermine the very enterprise of understanding what proposition is referred to in (1): according to sententialists, in (1) reference is made to the sentence ‘Snow is white’. Sententialism is generally considered doomed. The two main reasons why are the famous translation argument, first suggested by Alonzo Church, and a problem raised by Stephen Schiffer.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a unified solution to both criticisms. What I take to be the key ingredient sententialists may exploit is an observation that concerns the nature of languages and quotations: since quotation marks display the quoted material, if you are a speaker of the language the quoted material belongs to, you usually cannot but understand what is quoted. Moreover, I show that sententialists may appeal to that very observation also in order to answer another problem, pointed out by Kent Bach. I conclude that there are good reasons for resisting the temptation of introducing propositions in order to account for propositional attitude sentences.

1. Introduction

There is an obvious difference between the experience of listening to a sentence in a known language and to a sentence in an unknown one: when a subject listens to a sentence in a language she speaks, she understands it.¹ In the following, I will investigate the relationship between this difference and propositional attitude sentences, i.e., sentences like

- (1) Pierre believes that snow is white.

[†] King’s College London, Strand, London WC2R 2LS UK, Email: giulia.felappi@kcl.ac.uk

¹ Of course this is an idealization. We will see in section 3.3 what happens when a speaker of a language understands, as happens to all of us, only some of the words of that language.

There is a face-value theory for sentences of this kind, i.e. *propositionalism*,² according to which in (1)³ reference is made to the proposition *that snow is white*. Propositionalism finds support in a general dissatisfaction with an alternative analysis, i.e., *sententialism*, according to which in (1) reference is made to the sentence ‘Snow is white’. There are various, incompatible, theories of what sentences and propositions are, but they are generally considered as entities of a very different kind. Using Stephen Schiffer’s way of putting this (Schiffer 2003, 47), for whatever content is, sentences are language-dependent entities that *have* a content, while propositions are language-independent entities that *are* contents. Sententialism is generally considered doomed. The two main reasons why are the famous *translation argument*, first suggested by Alonzo Church, and a problem raised by Schiffer.

My purpose is to show that if sententialists take into account that listening to a bit of a known language is different from listening to a bit of an unknown one, they will be able to provide a unified solution to both criticisms. That difference, moreover, will be shown to be what sententialists may appeal to also in answering another problem, pointed out by Kent Bach.

Church, Schiffer and Bach’s objections tempt us to draw the conclusion that propositions should be introduced in order to account for propositional attitude sentences. I will instead conclude that in recognizing that we understand a sentence, if, but only if, we can, we have a good reason for resisting that temptation.

2. *The two main reasons for dissatisfaction with sententialism*

A defence of sententialism is primarily a defence of it from Church’s and Schiffer’s objections. Church thinks that his argument may be a *fatal objection* (Church 1950, 97; 1951, 5), Schiffer doubts that his problem is surmountable (Schiffer 2003, 47), and this is the way in which the two criticisms are usually taken. Moreover, different sententialist accounts differ on some important issues: Are we considering linguistic types or tokens? What does to believe a sentence mean? What is the relationship between what sentences a subject believes and her linguistic behaviour, i.e., do we believe only the sentences we accept? It is clear that in providing different answers to these questions, sententialist accounts can differ widely. But Church and Schiffer argue that their criticisms are directed

² On propositionalism being the face-value theory, see Schiffer (2008, 267–270). Recently (see for example Rosefeldt 2008), the thesis that that-clauses are referential devices has been shown to be in tension with some linguistic data. This is a problem common to both propositionalism and sententialism. In the light of the criticism, the thesis defended here should be taken to be the following: if that-clauses are devices of reference, then sententialism seems to be as good an account as propositionalism seems to be.

³ Or, better, in an utterance of it. Since nothing will rely on this, I will freely speak of the references made in a sentence, unless relevant.

against *any* sententialist account. Therefore, they are directed against the sententialist core thesis, i.e., that in propositional attitude sentences reference is made to sentences, and not against some other theses that can be held together with it. In this section, the two objections will be outlined. The next section is devoted to presenting what I take to be a successful sententialist solution to both.

2.1. Church's translation argument

Even if Church takes his argument as directed against any kind of sententialism, he presents it as primarily directed against Carnap's sententialist proposal (Carnap 1947, 54–62). Leaving aside any reference to Carnap's account, the translation argument can be restated neutrally as follows (Church 1950; 1951, 5–6; 1956, 62; 1973, 365):

- According to sententialism,
 - (1) Pierre believes that snow is white
 is to be analysed as
 - (1') Pierre believes 'Snow is white'⁴;
- The Italian translations of (1) and (1') are, respectively,
 - (1T) Pierre crede che la neve è bianca,
 - (1'T) Pierre crede 'Snow is white';
- According to sententialists, (1T) and (1'T) are thus translations of sentences that stand in the analysis relation. If sententialists were right, the two sentences would have to *convey the same meaning*;
- But (1T) and (1'T) would obviously convey different meanings to a monolingual speaker of Italian;
- Therefore (1') cannot be a semantic analysis of (1), contrary to sententialism.

2.2. Schiffer's problem

Schiffer too explicitly considers his problem as being directed against any kind of sententialism, but his primary polemical target is Davidson's paratactic account (Davidson 1968). Setting aside any reference to this particular proposal, the problem goes as follows (Schiffer 1987, 133–135; 2003, 47; 2008, 289):

- According to sententialism, in both
 - (1) Pierre believes that snow is white

⁴ There are different ways of spelling out what *to believe a sentence* amounts to: to believe the sentence to be true (Quine 1956, 185) or to have a belief which has the same content as the sentence (Higginbotham 2006, 102). In order to be as neutral as possible, I prefer sentences like 'Pierre believes "Snow is white"', even if they are ungrammatical in English.

(1') Pierre believes 'Snow is white'

reference is made to the sentence 'Snow is white' and of it, it is said that it is believed by Pierre. Thus for sententialists knowing what (1) asserts can require nothing more and nothing less than knowing what (1') asserts;

- Sententialists are then forced to hold that if

(2') Zoltan knows that Pierre believes 'Snow is white'

is true, so is

(2) Zoltan knows that Pierre believes that snow is white;

- If Zoltan is a monolingual speaker of Hungarian and is only told that Pierre believes the English sentence 'Snow is white' (2') is true. According to sententialism also (2) is true;
- Zoltan does not understand the English sentence, thus according to sententialism (2) can be true even if Zoltan does not know *what* Pierre believes, the *content* of his belief;
- Sententialism is, therefore, in conflict with this *datum*: one cannot know the assertion made, the truth stated, by (1) without knowing what Pierre believes, the content of his belief.⁵

3. A unified solution

Clearly, the two objections are tightly connected. Nevertheless, they rely on different assumptions and thus answering the two criticisms amounts to discussing different theses. Still, I suggest, sententialists may answer both criticisms on the same grounds, i.e., by exploiting the recognition of what is simply an observation about language and speakers. I will start by presenting the observation. We will then see why it is so exploitable.

3.1. The impeccable observation

This is the observation: listening to a bit of a known language is different from listening to a bit of an unknown one. When a subject listens to a sentence in a language that she is a speaker of, she understands it. It is not just that she can understand it, it is that, in the normal cases, she cannot but immediately understand it. As Meckler (1956, 325) suggestively put it,

it is a long established habit of human beings to pluck out the meanings of phrases, whatever they may be, and devour them *willy-nilly*.

Recently, this observation has been the starting point of a debate connected with the question: Do subjects *hear* meanings, i.e., is understanding a sentence that

⁵ A similar principle is defended by Recanati (2000, 10): "One cannot entertain the thought that John believes that grass is green without entertaining the thought that grass is green".

belongs to a known language part of the very auditory experience of hearing it?⁶ For the purpose of discussing Church's and Schiffer's objections, nothing as strong as a positive answer to the question is needed. What is needed is not an explanation of what happens, but simply recognizing that this is what happens.⁷ The observation that this is what happens is, as Barry Smith (Smith 2009, 183) puts it, "impeccable": it simply reports what happens, without purporting to provide us with a disputable explanation of how or why this is so.

It is particularly important to recognize that this immediate understanding of expressions belonging to a known language concerns also quoted expressions. Quotation marks are a linguistic tool with which we may speak about language itself and are thus able to change the semantic values of what occurs within them. Nonetheless, they cannot block our understanding of what is within them, provided that we understand it. It is not just that quotation marks are such that we can work out what they quote and then understand it, it is that the quoted material is displayed and so ready to be understood: you cannot say 'Mary' without saying 'Mary', you cannot listen to 'Mary' without listening to 'Mary'. Thus quotation is different from other mentioning devices that enable us to work out what the quoted item is, but in a non-straightforward way. Take for example the device recently discussed by Gaskin and Hill (Gaskin and Hill 2013, 206): letters are replaced by numbers so that the letter 'a' is replaced by the numeral '1', the letter 'b' by the numeral '2', and so on; numerals are concatenated by the symbol '*', so that the name of the name 'Mary' is '13*1*18*25'. In a community in which this convention is shared, speakers are able to recover the name 'Mary' from '13*1*18*25', but this takes quite a bit of work. With usual quotation, on the other hand, as Gaskin and Hill also remark, the quoted material is displayed, and thus already there for the hearer to understand what it means, exactly as when it is used. Even if the words refer only to words, for hearers there is some extra *free lunch* and they usually cannot but *devour* it. That is why, for example, we tend not to quote rude words. For politeness, we tend to prefer something like 'F***' or 'the F word', i.e., non-straightforward mention, to an explicit quotation (Saka 1998, 121–126). But, semantically, for any rude word *x*, 'x' is not rude, but a non-rude name of a rude word. Nonetheless, as in the present context, we avoid saying or writing it, because we know that speakers of English will immediately understand what is within quotes. That is why, moreover, in reading the title of this very paper, 'In Defence of Sententialism', you in fact thought that you were going to read something about a defence, even if 'Defence' occurs merely quoted in it.

⁶ See, for a discussion of the debate and for further references, O'Callaghan (2011). Unfortunately, propositional attitude sentences and their understanding are usually not discussed within this kind of debate.

⁷ Again, we will see in section 3.3 what happens when a speaker understands only some of the words of the language she is a speaker of.

As I will show later, I think that what happened to you in reading the title is all a sententialist needs in order to answer Church's and Schiffer's criticisms.

3.2. *On Church's argument*

Church merely outlines his argument. He provides neither a definition of *meaning*, nor of *adequate translation* and *analysis*. He does not say what it is for a sentence to *convey a meaning*, as much as he does not justify the thesis that the translation of

(1') Pierre believes 'Snow is white'

in Italian is

(1'T) Pierre crede 'Snow is white'

and not, for example,

(1'T') Pierre crede 'La neve è bianca',

in which also what occurs within quotes undergoes translation.⁸

The argument has been widely discussed, so widely that, arguably, all the logical space concerning these theses about translations and analyses has been filled by some paper or other.⁹ I will not attempt to establish whether there is such a thing as *the* correct translation of sentences like (1') or whether (1'T) is a correct translation of (1'), nor will I take any stance on the criteria for an adequate analysis. For when we take on board the impeccable observation that speakers of a language immediately understand quoted sentences of that language as a *free lunch*, not due to the references made, then I think there is no need to engage in such a discussion in order to answer the argument. Perhaps Church is wrong about translation and analysis. But, no matter how these notions have to be spelt out, and thus even if Church is right about them, there is a step in his argument that should be called into question.

⁸ In restating the argument in a different context, Church (1951, 6) introduces also the notion of *synonymy*, arguing that the two sentences should be synonymous and maintaining that synonymy is "to be tested by considering the information which each will convey" to monolingual speakers. But *information* is again an undefined notion.

⁹ The main different positions on the argument and on some reactions to it can be found in Burge (1978), Carnap (1954), Davidson (1963, 344–346; 1968, 135–136), Dummett (1981, 93–94), Field (2001, 160–162), Geach (1957, 91–92), Higginbotham (2006, 107–110), Kripke (2008, 186), Leeds (1979), Ludwig and Ray (1998, 144–147), Meckler (1956, 325), Putnam (1954, 114–117), Quine (1956, 187; 1960, 213–218), Richard (1990, 162–173), Salmon (2001), Scheffler (1954, 84–85).

Church starts his argument by remarking that

- (1T) Pierre crede che la neve è bianca
 (1'T) Pierre crede 'Snow is white'

convey different meanings to a monolingual speaker of Italian. Church does not clarify what 'to convey' means here.¹⁰ We may nonetheless accept his terminology and the intuitive idea behind it. What Church points out, just like our impeccable observation, is simply a fact about speakers and, as such, cannot be disputed. But from this Church concludes that sententialism cannot be correct. Sententialism being the thesis that in both

- (1) Pierre believes that snow is white
 (1') Pierre believes 'Snow is white'

reference is made to the sentence 'Snow is white', Church concludes that while in (1') reference is made to a sentence, this is not the case with (1). But, as we saw, when it comes to quotation there is a difference between what references are made and what is conveyed. Take the following example: suppose that there are two perfectly competent speakers of English and suppose they both listen to an utterance of

- (3) Pierre said: 'La neve è bianca'.

They are competent, so they both understand the utterance. But let us suppose that only one of them is also a speaker of Italian. I think it should be admitted that the two speakers would have something different conveyed to them: only the bilingual speaker would understand the sentence quoted and thus know the content of what Pierre said. In this case, obviously, the difference in what is conveyed cannot be due to some semantic characteristics of some sentences, because there is only one utterance of one sentence involved and the two speakers both perfectly understand it, being competent in English. Thus it should be recognized, and not just by sententialists but by everybody, Church included, that quotations create cases, like the one just imagined, in which the difference in what is conveyed is due not to the references made by the sentence, but also to the subjects understanding or not understanding the meanings of the words quoted.

¹⁰ At least for historical reasons, it would clearly be wrong to take Church as meaning, by *what is conveyed*, the rich pragmatic notion we are used to nowadays, according to which, for example, the so-called *implicatures* are part of what a sentence conveys. According to my response, Church mistakenly conflates what is semantically encoded in a sentence and what the sentence conveys. Thus, the richer the notion of what is conveyed is, the easier is the sententialist way out. In the main text, in relying on a poorer notion which is more faithful to what Church should have had in mind, I thus make the worst-case scenario for sententialists.

What happens with (3), a sententialist may well respond to Church, is what happens also with the sentences involved in his argument, since in them, too, quotation is involved. This is, I think, the key idea a sententialist may employ in successfully replying to Church.¹¹ So let us see the details.

There are four sentences involved in the argument, i.e.:

- (1) Pierre believes that snow is white
- (1') Pierre believes 'Snow is white'
- (1T) Pierre crede che la neve è bianca
- (1'T) Pierre crede 'Snow is white'.

Leaving aside the notions of *analysis* and *translation*, but taking on board our impeccable observation, these are the relevant relations a sententialist takes the sentences to stand with each other. For what concerns

- (1) Pierre believes that snow is white
- (1') Pierre believes 'Snow is white',

sententialism is the thesis that in both sentences the same reference is made to the very same English sentence 'Snow is white'. So according to sententialism in neither is reference made to the content of Pierre's belief, but a speaker of English listening to the English quoted sentence will immediately understand what it means and have nonetheless the content immediately conveyed to her.

As for

- (1) Pierre believes that snow is white
- (1') Pierre believes 'Snow is white'

and

- (1T) Pierre crede che la neve è bianca,

the first two and the third obviously belong to different languages. According to sententialism, different references are made: in the English (1) and (1') reference is made to an English sentence, while in the Italian (1T) reference is made to an Italian one. Even if in none is reference made to the content of Pierre's belief, each sentence conveys such a content to the speakers of the language the sentence belongs to. In the English sentences an English sentence is quoted and English speakers thus understand it, while in the Italian sentence an Italian sentence is quoted and Italian speakers understand it.

¹¹ Even if with different intentions and conclusions, since in the end he rejects both sententialism and propositionalism, this is also Meckler's (1956, 325) solution to Church's argument. To the best of my knowledge, Meckler is a forgotten hero, to whom no reference can be found in the discussions of sententialism and propositionalism. Also Leeds (1979, 46), although with different conclusions, suggests something along the same lines.

Sentences

(1) Pierre believes that snow is white

(1') Pierre believes 'Snow is white'

and

(1'T) Pierre crede 'Snow is white',

again belong to different languages, but they all make the same reference to the English sentence 'Snow is white'. Since in the English (1) and (1') an English sentence is quoted, English speakers listening to either (1) or (1') will understand it, and have immediately conveyed to them the content of Pierre's belief. This is not what happens with monolingual speakers of Italian listening to an utterance of the Italian (1'T): since an English sentence is quoted, a monolingual speaker of Italian will not understand it, and there will thus be no additional *free lunch* understanding.

These two triplets of sentences show that when two languages and quotation are involved, given that we understand a quoted sentence, if, but only if, we can, there is a trade-off between preservation of references and preservation of what is conveyed: if references are preserved, as in the second triplet, there is a loss of what is conveyed; if, on the other hand, what is conveyed is preserved, references have to change. *In passim*, it should be noted that the trade-off between references and what is conveyed that we have in the case of quotation is not completely *sui generis*. Another is the one between references and self-reference that we have in the case of self-referential sentences: take

(4) This very utterance is true

as said at time t . At time t' , we may have two utterances:

(4') The utterance made at t is true

which preserves the reference to the utterance made at t , but is not self-referential, and

(4'') This very utterance is true

which preserves the self-referential aspect of the original utterance, but makes reference to the utterance made at t' and not to the utterance made at t .¹²

Now to the couple of sentences directly involved in one of the steps of Church's argument. For sententialists, in the two Italian

¹² Burge relies on the trade-off between reference and self-reference in his answer to Church's argument and in fact holds that propositional attitude sentences are self-referential. Since with quotation there is in any event a trade-off between references preserved and preservation of what is conveyed, holding that the sentence is self-referential is redundant. This seems an advantage, also considering that propositional attitude sentences do not look self-referential.

- (1T) Pierre crede che la neve è bianca
 (1'T) Pierre crede 'Snow is white',

different references are made: in the first reference is made to the Italian sentence 'La neve è bianca', while in the second to the English sentence 'Snow is white'. Thus for sententialists there is a semantic difference between the two sentences. Moreover, the two sentences are different also concerning what they convey to the monolingual speakers of Italian: even if in (1T) reference is made to a sentence and not to the content of Pierre's belief, a monolingual speaker of Italian listening to an utterance of it will *willy-nilly* understand the quoted sentence, and thus have that content immediately conveyed to her. With (1'T), instead, since reference is made to an English sentence, a monolingual speaker of Italian will not understand the quoted sentence and thus will have no idea of what Pierre believes. Thus sententialists, with Church, recognize the following:

- (1T) Pierre crede che la neve è bianca
 (1'T) Pierre crede 'Snow is white'
 would obviously convey different meanings to a monolingual speaker of Italian.

Sententialists cannot deny this. Like ours, this also is an impeccable observation, simply a fact about speakers. But here is where sententialists may and should disagree with Church. From the indisputable fact about (1T) and (1'T), Church concludes:

- Therefore
 (1') Pierre believes 'Snow is white'
 cannot be a semantic analysis of
 (1) Pierre believes that snow is white
 contrary to sententialism.

Leaving again the notion of *analysis* out, what Church concludes is that sententialism cannot be correct. Sententialism is the thesis that in both (1) and (1') reference is made to the sentence 'Snow is white'. Thus from what two sentences convey Church concludes what *references* are made by two other sentences. Church's argument has then the following structure: there are two sentences conveying the same; suppose they make the same references. Then take a third sentence conveying the same as the first and a fourth making the same references as the second. Since the third and the fourth are different for what they convey, the first and the second should make different references. But this, as we just saw, is a *non sequitur*. When it comes to quoted sentences, preservation of references and preservation of what is conveyed do not go together, as Church holds, but there is instead a trade-off: if you pick the reference-preserving sentence, you pick one that

conveys something different, and vice versa. In picking the third and fourth sentences as Church does, we then end up with a sentence preserving references but conveying something different from the original ones and a sentence preserving what is conveyed by the original ones but making different references. It is, therefore, in accordance with, and not in opposition to sententialism, that these two sentences convey something different, as they obviously do. Therefore the fact that (1T) and (1'T) differ as to what they convey does not show, contrary to what Church urges, that (1) and (1') make different references, but is instead in perfect accordance with sententialists who take on board the impeccable observation and thus that references are preserved only if what is conveyed is not.

In discussing and defending Church's argument, Nathan Salmon criticizes a sententialist solution of this kind by stating that Church's argument concerns what is *semantically encoded* by the sentences involved and not *what may be inferred from this* together with knowledge of Italian (Salmon 2001, 356).¹³ The solution suggested here amounts precisely to denying that Church can speak only of what is semantically encoded. For in speaking about what a sentence conveys to a speaker, he is himself departing from a notion that concerns only the semantic characteristics of the sentence: given the impeccable observation that speakers of a language immediately understand the quoted sentences, when it comes to quoted sentences what is semantically encoded is not, generally, what is conveyed.

Therefore, in taking the impeccable observation into account, I think sententialists may well conclude, *pace* Church, that his argument is not, after all, a *fatal objection*. So to Schiffer's problem.

3.3. On Schiffer's problem

As just seen, I take sententialists to be able to simply deny one of the steps in Church's argument. For Schiffer's problem, I instead think that sententialists need to build a more sophisticated answer, which is composed up of various steps. We will see each in detail below, but let us start with a sketch. Schiffer takes Zoltan to be able to show that according to sententialism it is possible to know that Pierre believes that snow is white without knowing the content of Pierre's belief. I think that full-hearted sententialists are forced to admit that Schiffer is right on this. Sententialists can nonetheless show that, contrary to what Schiffer thinks, this is a surmountable problem. First of all, in fact, they can show that it is an exotic case,

¹³ Salmon adds that the main reason why sententialism cannot be correct is that it does not account for the fact that a that-clause "carries with it a special way of conceptualizing the content of the sentence following the 'that', an identifying way of thinking of the proposition which constitutes acquaintance" (2001, 363–364). Using this terminology, sententialists may remark that however *acquaintance* is to be defined, also according to sententialism a hearer of a propositional attitude sentence gets acquainted with the content of the attitude. For the sentence occurring as quoted belongs to a known language and its meaning is immediately understood by the hearer.

which has no bearing on the usual sentences we use, in the various natural languages, to speak about other subjects' attitudes. But this is still not a fully satisfactory answer. For whatever happens with natural languages, a propositionalist may still take Zoltan as showing that propositionalism is better than sententialism. But sententialists have a reply also here. They may show that either also propositionalists fall victim to Schiffer's problem, or they need to face, so to say, their own problematic case, i.e., the ignorant of particle physics but enthusiastic Mary. And then sententialists may well say that propositionalism does not look such a better option than sententialism. Thus, to the details.

Schiffer's problem for sententialism is the following: according to him, sententialists are forced to hold that sentences

- (2) Zoltan knows that Pierre believes that snow is white
 (2') Zoltan knows that Pierre believes 'Snow is white'

have the same truth-conditions. From this, as Schiffer shows with his case of the Hungarian monolingual Zoltan, it follows that sententialism is in conflict with the datum that it is not possible to know that Pierre believes that snow is white without knowing what Pierre believes, the content of his belief.

A sententialist may try to deny that she is forced to hold that (2) and (2') have the same truth-conditions. This is exactly what Jim Higginbotham (Higginbotham 2006) suggested, but I think that solving the problem in this way constitutes a departure from sententialism, and not a defence of it. According to Higginbotham,

- (2) Zoltan knows that Pierre believes that snow is white

is true iff there is something Zoltan knows that *matches in content* with

- (1) Pierre believes that snow is white,
 while

- (2') Zoltan knows that Pierre believes 'Snow is white',

is true iff there is something Zoltan knows that *matches in content* with

- (1') Pierre believes 'Snow is white'.

Thus, he maintains, in order for (2) and (2') to have the same truth-conditions, (1) and (1') should *match in content* but, he argues, they do not, "because the relation of content-matching intervenes, and distinguishes (as it should)" (Higginbotham 2006, 111). Higginbotham does not define the relation of *matching in content*, but it seems to me that any definition according to which (1) and (1') do not *match in content* counts as a departure from sententialism. As Schiffer remarks, according to sententialism in both sentences reference is made to the sentence 'Snow is white' and of it, it is said that it is believed by Pierre. Thus full-hearted

sententialists are forced to say that knowing what (1) asserts can require nothing more and nothing less than knowing what (1′) asserts. Full-hearted sententialists should then agree with Schiffer that in the case of Zoltan, sententialism allows that one can know the truth stated by (1) without knowing the content of Pierre’s belief.

Schiffer takes this as a very serious problem for sententialists. He says that he doubts that it is surmountable. But sententialists can show that they may surmount it in the following way. Propositional attitude sentences belonging to the various natural languages are used by the speakers of those languages in order to speak about attitudes and the contents of those attitudes. This certainly seems a datum. But this datum is perfectly accounted for by sententialists, as soon as we take on board the impeccable observation that speakers of a language immediately understand its sentences. According to propositionalism, when provided with utterances of sentences like

- (1) Pierre believes that snow is white
- (2) Zoltan knows that Pierre believes that snow is white

English speakers know the contents of the ascribed attitudes because reference is made to those contents. According to sententialists, instead, those contents are conveyed without being referred to: English speakers immediately understand ‘Snow is white’ and ‘Pierre believes that snow is white’ even if they occur merely quoted in (1) and (2). The quoted sentences are understood because they belong to the very language of the reports, thus to the language known to the speaker. This is what always happens with propositional attitude sentences belonging to our natural languages. Quotation marks are such that a sentence in one language may be quoted in a sentence belonging to another, as it happens, for example, in the perfectly grammatical English sentence

- (3) Pierre said: ‘La neve è bianca’.

But a complement clause cannot be in a language different from the language of the whole sentence, as shown by the ungrammaticality of word salads like

- (1′′) *Pierre believes that la neve è bianca.

We speak about other subjects’ attitudes via that-clauses, not via quoted sentences. Thus syntax makes it impossible for us to speak about a subject’s attitude in a way that blocks the *free lunch understanding* of the content of that attitude. Sententialism is a theory about the semantics of English, in which sentences like (1′′) are ungrammatical, and thus sententialists may take Schiffer’s problem as not a serious one in that it concerns an exotic case, which has no bearing on what happens with the grammatical sentences we use in English to speak about other subjects’ attitudes.

But this defence may not be enough. A propositionalist would still be unsatisfied. According to propositionalism, always, if we know the truth stated by

- (1) Pierre believes that snow is white

we know the content of Pierre's belief. Thus, even if the usual natural language sentences do not lead to a conflict between sententialism and knowledge of the content of the attitude, still Zoltan shows, for how exotic a case it is, that in that case sententialism is indeed in that conflict. So propositionalists may still claim, given Zoltan, to have a better account.

I think that here sententialists should react as follows. Obviously, Schiffer's problem may work as a propositionalist claim to be a better account only if propositionalism does not fall itself victim to a similar problem. But then propositionalists need to put some constraints on the notion of *grasping a proposition*. Propositionalists take

- (1) Pierre believes that snow is white

as referring to the proposition *that snow is white*. For them, propositions are contents and in knowing the truth stated by (1), we know the content of Pierre's belief, i.e., as they usually put it, we *grasp that proposition*. Unfortunately, Schiffer does not develop these notions, limiting himself to stating that knowing what Pierre believes includes, first, knowing that he has a belief that is true if, and only if, snow is white and, second, knowing that it is about snow and whiteness (Schiffer 2008, 289; Schiffer 1987, 133). This does not help much: What is it for a content to be *about* something? But, luckily, there is no need to spell all these notions out. For it suffices to notice that with the aim in view of claiming that propositionalism is better than sententialism, propositionalism cannot be combined with so-called *consumerism*. According to consumerism, we may grasp a proposition, as Kaplan puts it, "vicariously, through the symbolic resources that come to us through our language" (Kaplan 1989, 603). Now imagine this scenario: Mary is an English speaker and, like many of us, has no ideas what particle physics is. She is now listening to a conference delivered by Professor Higgs. Higgs has just said the following:

- (5) The Standard Model of particle physics rests on the existence of Higgs's boson.

According to consumerism, Mary may, although vicariously, grasp the proposition *that the Standard Model of particle physics rests on the existence of Higgs's boson*. But then why cannot the English sentence 'Snow is white' do the same job for the monolingual speaker of Hungarian Zoltan as (5) does for Mary? There seem to be no good reasons why we can vicariously grasp a proposition *only if* the symbols belong to a language we generally understand, but not in the relevant part (Mercier

1994, 504–506). Thus if Higgs's utterance can work for Mary, the English sentence can work for Zoltan too. Therefore, if consumerism is endorsed, also according to propositionalism Zoltan, in knowing that Pierre believes the proposition expressed by the sentence 'Snow is white' can, even if vicariously, grasp the proposition that snow is white and thus know what Pierre believes.

Zoltan is thus a point in favour of propositionalism only if propositionalists discard consumerism. May propositionalists simply reject consumerism? There is no need to establish here whether consumerism is correct. For it seems that even if consumerism is rejected, propositionalism is not in a better position than sententialism. For let us see what happens if consumerism is rejected. If consumerism is rejected, Mary cannot grasp the proposition *that the Standard Model of particle physics rests on the existence of Higgs's boson* vicariously. But there seems to be no other way in which she can grasp it. She does not know anything about particle physics and for her Higgs's words are but empty placeholders. However the notion of *grasping a proposition* is to be exactly cashed out, if consumerism is rejected Mary does not grasp the proposition expressed by Higgs's words. But then the following sentence,

- (6) Mary thinks that Higgs believes that the Standard Model of particle physics rests on the existence of Higgs's boson,

becomes problematic. Mary is listening to Higgs, she takes him as sincere and thus thinks that Higgs believes that the Standard Model of particle physics rests on the existence of Higgs's boson. Thus (6) seems true. But Mary cannot grasp the proposition *that Higgs believes that the Standard Model of particle physics rests on the existence of Higgs's boson*, because if consumerism is rejected, she does not grasp it, in that she does not grasp the proposition *that the Standard Model of particle physics rests on the existence of Higgs's boson*. If propositionalists here say that it is possible to grasp a proposition about another proposition without grasping the latter, then Zoltan looms again: even if Zoltan does not grasp the proposition *that snow is white*, he can grasp the proposition *that Pierre believes that snow is white* and thus know what Pierre believes. Thus, if propositionalists avoid Zoltan, (6) comes out false. What is Mary thinking, then? A propositionalist may say that since Mary does not grasp the proposition, Mary's belief is a case of metalinguistic thought, i.e., that (6) is actually tantamount to something like¹⁴:

- (6') Mary thinks that Higgs believes 'The Standard Model of particle physics rests on the existence of Higgs's boson'.

¹⁴ An attempt in this direction may be found in Sperber (1985, 49–59). Sperber focuses on nonsensical sentences, but his considerations may apply to the case at hand.

But then, if propositionalists allow for some ascriptions to be metalinguistic, there seem to be other difficulties: What exactly is the relation between a metalinguistic belief and the corresponding non-metalinguistic one? (Recanati 1997, 87–90). Take Mary again. During the conference, she gets intrigued by what Higgs says, she wants to discover herself whether Higgs is right and she thus decides to study physics. Now years have passed since Higgs's conference and Mary is now an expert on particle physics. Sententialism explains what happened as follows: according to sententialism, at the conference

- (6) Mary thinks that Higgs believes that the Standard Model of particle physics rests on the existence of Higgs's boson

became true. In (6) the sentence 'Higgs believes that the Standard Model of particle physics rests on the existence of Higgs's boson' occurs as quoted and at the conference Mary had virtually nothing conveyed to her by it. Then she gradually had more conveyed to her and now that sentence perfectly conveys to her the content of Higgs's belief.¹⁵ She thus spent her career in understanding better and better the sentence, and the more she understood, the better she knew what Higgs believes.¹⁶ Propositionalists need to explain what happened to Mary differently. According to them, it seems, Mary at the conference formed a metalinguistic thought. But she is now an expert on bosons so that she now presumably has a full grasp of the proposition *that the Standard Model of particle physics rests on the existence of Higgs's boson*. So there are two beliefs, one metalinguistic and the other propositional, and Mary moved from the one to the other. But when exactly did that happen, when did she acquire the propositional belief? It seems impossible to find any non-arbitrary answer. This lack of a candidate for the point at which the new belief is acquired seems a strong signal that Mary did not actually change attitude at all, but formed a thought at the conference, and kept on simply retaining it, while understanding things better and better. This can be held by both

¹⁵ On sententialism as able to allow for a subject to understand the content of an attitude gradually, see also Higginbotham (1995, 123–124).

¹⁶ In discussing Schiffer's problem, Lepore and Löwer (1989) suggest a solution along the following lines: taking an utterance of a sentence like 'Higgs believes that the Standard Model of particle physics rests on the existence of Higgs's boson' as said by Mary, they say that "[t]here seems to us to be nothing preventing all of [Mary]'s utterances from being true, contrary to the assumption that underlies the objection" (1989, 351–352). Even if their answer to the problem may be taken to go in the same direction as the answer suggested here, there is a crucial difference: they argue that Mary's report can be *true* even if Mary does not know the content of the belief. Thus according to them Schiffer's objection relies on the thesis that a report cannot be true if the reporter does not know the content of the attitude reported. This is not how I interpret Schiffer. I think the thesis they discuss is too obviously false – what Mary knows makes no difference to what Higgs believes! – to take Schiffer to rely on it. I take Schiffer as holding the much more plausible thesis that the truth stated by a report cannot be *known* by a subject if she does not know the content of the attitude reported.

sententialists and consumerists, but not by propositionalists who reject consumerism.

Thus, if propositionalists are safe from Zoltan, they are not safe from Mary. Propositionalism seems thus not to be in a better position than the one sententialism is in, but just in a specular one. It is true that sententialists need to face Zoltan, but having Zoltan who knows nothing about what a subject believes allows us to explain what gradually happened to Mary. This seems welcome, especially considering that (6) belongs to the way in which we speak, *in our natural languages*, about what somebody like Mary believes. The case of Mary, moreover, does not seem exotic at all: for all of us there are so many territories in which we are just like her.

This is, I think, a fully adequate answer to Schiffer's problem. Also in this answer, a crucial role is played by the impeccable observation that speakers of a language understand the sentences of that language, even if merely quoted. As I will immediately show, this impeccable observation is a useful resource that sententialists may exploit in answering also another criticism.¹⁷

3.4. Another alleged problem straightforwardly accounted for

Here is the problem, pointed out by Kent Bach. The following sentence,

- (7) Immediately after Pierre realized that Mary was not at home, she arrived,

is a perfectly acceptable sentence of English. In one of the readings, the pronoun 'she' refers anaphorically to Mary. But how can 'she' refer anaphorically to Mary if, as sententialists hold, the name 'Mary' does not refer to Mary? As Bach puts it, this fact becomes "something of a mystery" (Bach 1997, 218).

Making all the assumptions explicit, the problem raised by Bach concerning the sententialist account of (7) is the following:

¹⁷ Kirk Ludwig has recently (2014) published an answer to Schiffer which aims, just like mine, at showing that propositionalism is not better off. Apart from the details, one main difference should be noted. Ludwig holds that also propositionalists have to face the problematic case of Zoltan because according to them if 'Zoltan knows that Pierre believes that the proposition expressed by 'Snow is white' is true, so is 'Zoltan knows that Pierre believes that snow is white'. But a propositionalist may answer that the two terms that follow 'believes', although co-referential, do not make the same contribution in the propositions expressed by what follow 'knows', so that in the two Zoltan knows different propositions. The easiest way of holding this is to go Fregean: propositions are made of senses, not references, and the senses are different. Unfortunately, Ludwig admits that for this propositionalist account he does not have knockdown arguments. I think that, in order to discard the possibility that propositionalism is better than sententialism, we should also rely, as I do in my answer, on the case of Mary, which seems problematic for propositionalists, no matter whether senses or other propositionalist strategies block the problem created by Zoltan.

- The pronoun ‘she’ is anaphoric for ‘Mary’: it refers to what ‘Mary’ refers to;
- According to sententialism, ‘Mary’ does not refer to Mary;
- But then sententialism makes it mysterious how ‘she’ can refer to Mary.

I think that sententialists may here simply dismiss the problem. They have a very cheap answer. They may start by saying that in general it is not clear what anaphora is. Anaphora may be characterized as the phenomenon whereby “an occurrence of an expression has its referent supplied by an occurrence of some other expression” (King 2013). Although this characterization may provide us with an intuitive grasp of the phenomenon, it is clear that at a closer look it is at best just a rough characterization: What is it for an occurrence of one term to *supply reference* for the occurrence of another term? Allowing themselves to use a sloppy terminology for the sake of argument, sententialists may say that if anaphora is so characterized, then it is not sententialism that is responsible for the mystery, for there are endless other cases similar in the relevant respect which do not involve propositional attitude sentences (Sainsbury 2005, 128). One case is the following:

- (8) *A mosquito is buzzing around our room. In fact there are hundreds of them. They are annoying.*

Even if ‘a mosquito’, ‘them’ and ‘they’ are not and indeed cannot be co-referential, it is nonetheless clear that ‘a mosquito’ may be taken *to supply the reference* for ‘they’, and this is all the anaphoric phenomenon is supposed to be about. How it works that ‘they’ has reference so supplied is not less mysterious than how in (7) ‘she’ may refer to Mary even if ‘Mary’ and ‘she’ are not co-referential. Another case is the following example first pointed out by Barbara Partee (Partee 1973, 412):

- (9) Immediately after Pierre shouted ‘Mary is not at home’, she arrived.

How can ‘she’ refer to Mary here, considering that the antecedent ‘Mary’ is enclosed in quotation marks and thus does not refer to Mary?

I take this as a proper answer to Bach, but I also think that sententialists may provide a more engaging answer, in which they do not limit themselves to showing other mysteries, but try to make the mystery a bit less esoteric. Bach’s problem may be rephrased as follows, with the help of a comparison: for whatever exactly anaphora is, in both the following sentences the reference of ‘she’ to Mary seems to be secured in the same way:

- (7) Immediately after Pierre realized that Mary was not at home, she arrived,
- (10) When Pierre woke up, Mary was not at home, but she arrived immediately after.

The most intuitive way to explain how the reference of 'she' to Mary is secured is to hold that in both the following mechanism is at work: 'she' refers to Mary because it is somehow semantically encoded in the sentences that the pronoun refers to whatever the name 'Mary' refers to; 'Mary' refers to Mary, and this is why 'she' refers to Mary as well. As Bach notices, this homogeneous explanation is clearly not available to sententialists. For they cannot maintain that in (7) 'Mary' refers to Mary, since denying that is part of what sententialism amounts to. Thus sententialists need to provide a different explanation. This is how I think the alternative sententialist explanation may look like. Sententialists may here again appeal to the impeccable observation that speakers of a language understand words and sentences of that language, and hold that the referent of 'she' to Mary in (7) should be explained in the same way in which the reference of an obviously non-anaphoric occurrence of 'she' is usually explained. Leaving aside problematic cases, such as those in which no female or too many females are salient, in a usual case of a non-anaphoric 'she', the pronoun semantically refers to the salient female in the context. Thus, in a sentence like

(11) She arrived

said in isolation in a context in which Mary has been pointed to, the context provides us with the referent for the pronoun: 'she' refers to Mary because she is the salient woman in the context. For a sententialist this is what happens also with

(7) Immediately after Pierre realized that Mary was not at home, she arrived.

The pronoun 'she' semantically refers, as usual, to the salient woman in the context. Things are salient in a context for many different reasons. A speaker may point to something, something may simply be the only thing around of the right kind. Also what has been said has a role here. If the speaker already talked about Mary, she may then use (11) to refer to her again and the hearer will, in the normal cases, understand this. But referring is not necessary: since a hearer immediately understands what a quoted sentence or phrase means, quoting is enough. Even if the speaker merely mentions the name 'Mary', she may nonetheless take for granted that for a hearer that is not just a cluster of meaningless sounds. Thus the speaker may then use (11) to refer to Mary, even if no previous reference to Mary has been made. When the hearer listens to the 'she' occurring in (7), she already listened to the sentence 'Mary was not at home'. Even if the sentence was quoted and not used, since she immediately understood the sentence, she understood the name 'Mary' as if it were used. For her, whoever the name 'Mary' would have referred to in isolation is thus salient. Since 'she', as usual, semantically refers to the salient female in the context, for the hearer it therefore refers to whoever

‘Mary’ would refer to in isolation, i.e., to Mary.¹⁸ According to an answer like the one just sketched, the reference of ‘she’ to Mary is due to two different mechanisms in (7) and

- (10) When Pierre woke up, Mary was not at home, but she arrived immediately after,

since in (10) ‘Mary’ clearly does not occur as quoted. But sententialists may provide an explanation of why, even if it is not so, it may look as if the mechanism is the same. Even if ‘she’ is taken to behave similarly in (7) and

- (11) She arrived

said in isolation while pointing to Mary, an important difference is to be recognized: in (7), as we saw, it is what occurs explicitly in (7), and not some feature of the extra linguistic context, that makes the hearer understand what ‘she’ refers to. Thus there is a difference between (7) and (10), because in (7) there is no semantic or syntactic link between ‘Mary’ and ‘she’. But it is nonetheless still true on the sententialist answer that in (7), as well as in (10), ‘she’ depends for its reference on ‘Mary’. Finally, it should be noted that the account sketched may be given also concerning

- (9) Immediately after Pierre shouted ‘Mary is not at home’, she arrived,

so that this account may render less mysterious also some mysteries that are such for everybody. Sententialists may thus also claim that it may well be that we should accept that the reference of some pronouns is secured in the way just sketched, quite independently of what theory is endorsed about propositional attitudes.

I think that also this more engaging sententialist approach to Bach’s problem should count as an adequate answer. But it is surely just a sketchy answer. Much more needs to be said about what *context* exactly is, and what it means for something to be *salient*. But it should be noted that these notions are complex and problematic in themselves and the sententialist cannot be blamed because she did not spell them out in detail. Furthermore, if she is so blamed, she may well switch back to the dismissive answer, and explain that she will solve Bach’s problem when provided in the first place with exact notions and a solution to all the other mysteries. Sententialists may conclude that however (9) is to be explained, when it is so explained, they will take that route as well, and explain

¹⁸ This is the simplest case. Things get more complicated when more than one female is salient, for different reasons. With ‘Immediately after Pierre realized that Mary was not at home, she arrived,’ the salience of the woman called ‘Mary’ is always there, because the mentioned name ‘Mary’ occurs in the very sentence. But a speaker may utter the sentence while also pointing to Sue.

(7) Immediately after Pierre realized that Mary was not at home, she arrived similarly.

4. Conclusion

Partee’s example

(9) Immediately after Pierre shouted ‘Mary is not at home’, she arrived

is an English direct speech report: ‘Mary is not at home’ occurs merely quoted in it. Still, the sentence ‘Mary is not at home’ is immediately understood by English speakers: all in all, understanding English sentences is what being an English speaker amounts to. We use sentences like (9) exactly because we know that the hearer will immediately understand also the quoted sentence. There would simply be no point in uttering (9) on the assumption that the hearer will not immediately understand what the quoted sentence means. Sentence (9) is thus a model for understanding what sententialists really hold. They maintain that in using propositional attitude sentences we may well refer to sentences and not to contents, because the content is still there as a *free lunch* for the hearers, a lunch they usually cannot but devour.

Lying behind all the objections considered here – Church’s argument as well as Schiffer’s and Bach’s problems – there is the common assumption that sententialism makes contents disappear from propositional attitude sentences. But this assumption is false. Sententialism is an account of propositional attitude sentences in terms of language-dependent entities that *have* a content. But this does not mean that contents disappear, they only disappear from the references made. In recognizing the impeccable observation that speakers of a language immediately understand sentences of that language, sententialists can argue that contents are there, as immediately conveyed, even if not as referred to.

Church’s and Schiffer’s objections tempt us to conclude that propositions should be introduced in order to account for propositional attitude sentences. But the conclusion to be drawn seems instead to be that the impeccable observation is a good reason to resist that temptation.*

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