

**WHY THE NEW THEORIST MAY STILL NEED TO  
EXPLAIN COGNITIVE SIGNIFICANCE  
BUT NOT MIND DOING IT**

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In "Has Semantics Rested on a Mistake", Howard Wettstein denies that semantics must account for cognitive significance. He thus rejects Frege's condition of adequacy for semantics and rids the new theorists from seemingly intractable puzzles. In a more recent article, Wettstein claims that not only reference but even cognitive significance is not a matter of how the referent is presented to the mind of the speaker.

In this paper, I submit that the crucial element in the debate between new theorists and neo-Fregeans concerning the semantic significance of language is the connection between semantic matters and the human thought.

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In the most important article of the collection of his essays *Has Semantic Rested On A Mistake?* [1991], which also provides the title to the whole collection, Howard Wettstein claims that new theorists of Reference<sup>1</sup> should reject Frege's so-called condition of adequacy, i.e., the claim that any adequate semantics must explain the problems of cognitive significance such as the informativeness of identity statements containing coreferential terms. In this paper, I focus on the connection between cognitive significance and the content of speakers' minds<sup>2</sup>. Prima facie, Wettstein's claim aims at redefining the goals of semantics. Yet, I believe that the disagreement between new theorists and other Fregean or anti-Fregean semanticists can be better characterized as one concerning what an adequate account of the cognitive significance of language should really include. In the end, my discussion provides some support for the thesis that even new theorists may legitimately try to solve these puzzles.

First, I state a Fregean argument which can be rejected by denying Frege's condition of adequacy. This argument provides a useful background for the current debate between new theorists and neo-Fregeans. Second, I reconstruct what I take to be the best argument against Frege's condition of adequacy available in "Has Semantic Rested On A Mistake?". Third, I discuss the new theorist recent claim that "*cognitive significance is not a matter of what is in the head*" (Wettstein [1989] 330, [1991] 172). I submit that this claim conflicts with one of the premises of the reconstructed argument against Frege's condition of adequacy. If this interpretation is correct, then new theorists cannot consistently deny Frege's condition of adequacy and hold the more recent thesis concerning cognitive significance. I suggest that the best way out of this difficulty leads to the acceptance rather than to the rejection of Frege's condition of adequacy. This may seem unappealing, but, once cognitive significance is relieved of its Fregean link with the thinking processes of the speakers, even new theorists may not mind providing an explanation for its puzzling questions.

Let us first turn to a Fregean argument which claims that the new theory of reference cannot provide an adequate semantics:

- (A) P1. There are certain data, let us call them *Frege's data*, on the cognitive significance of sentences. They concern (1) propositions or beliefs expressed by sentences containing non-denoting singular terms, (2) the different informational content of identities with distinct but co-referential singular terms, and (3) the explanation of actions ensuing from beliefs expressed by sentences containing co-referential terms.<sup>3</sup>
- P2. *Frege's insight*: Frege's data cannot be accounted by appeal only to reference, but they can be explained by the Fregean distinction between sense and reference.
- P3. The new theory has not within it the resources to account for the cognitive significance of language.
- P4. *Frege's condition of adequacy*: any semantic account of singular terms must answer questions about the cognitive significance of language.
- C. The new theory of reference is an inadequate semantics. (Wettstein [1986] 188, [1991] 112)

This argument claims that any adequate semantics must account for Frege's puzzles and yet this cannot be done in terms only of reference. So far anti-

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Fregeans would agree with Frege. But, the argument continues, the new theory does not have resources (other than reference) to account for these puzzles, hence, it is an inadequate semantics.

New theorists have differently responded to this argument.<sup>4</sup> While Kaplan and Perry have tried to show the falsehood of P3., Wettstein tries to reject P4., i.e., Frege's condition of adequacy:

I have rejected the Perry-Kaplan attempt to explain cognitive significance... Am I not admitting, then, that the new theorist's *semantic* account fails to provide anything like a solution to the *cognitive* puzzles? Isn't this in violation of Frege's condition of adequacy? My suggestion is that at this point we make a more radical break with Frege's outlook. The new theorist should reject Frege's adequacy condition outright. (Wettstein [1986] 200, [1991] 123)

This passage marks the transition from the first more critical part to the second more creative part of Wettstein's article. The first part can be seen as an extended discussion of the question whether or not the Perry-Kaplan strategy provides an explanation for cognitive significance which allows the new theorist to account for Frege's puzzles. Here, I address no part of the discussion between Wettstein and Perry or Kaplan. Instead, I focus on what follows this passage which seems to contain the outline of a possible argumentation for the more radical move of denying Frege's condition of adequacy.

This argument is rooted in the contrast between Frege's, and what Wettstein calls the Fregean, approach to semantics and the new theorists' approach. This is a difference in focus:

Where Frege's primary focus was on the connection between language and the mind ... [the new theorist's] interest is in the connection between language and the world. ... [The new theorist] is doing the anthropology of our institutions of natural language, and ... wants to understand the institutionalized conventions in accordance with which our terms refer. (Wettstein [1986] 201, [1991] 124).<sup>5</sup>

The Fregeans see the connection between language and thought as

fundamental, the new theorists see the crucial connection in the relationship between language and the institutionalized practices of language users. Because of this difference in focus, new theorists and Fregeans pursue fundamentally different projects.

Given this contrast, it plausibly follows that their stand on cognitive significance will be different:

New theorists, often not keenly aware of this fundamental difference between what they were, in fact, doing and Frege's project, have been embarrassed by the failure of their positive account to be responsive to the problems of cognitive significance. These problems seemed to them, given their Fregean upbringing, crucial for the semantics of natural language. Given the perspective just delineated, however, there was little reason to think that the new approach to semantics would have any immediate implications for the problems of cognitive significance, and, therefore, no reason to be embarrassed by this failure. There is no reason to suppose that, in general, if we successfully uncover the institutionalized conventions governing the references of our terms, we will have captured the ways in which speakers think about their referents. (Wettstein [1986] 201, [1991] 124).

The sentence before the last one claims that, as the new theory of reference "wants to understand the institutionalized conventions in accordance with which our terms refer," it may plausibly have no implications for the problems of cognitive significance. Yet, the new theorist's approach to semantics is as legitimate an approach to semantics as any other. Hence, Frege's condition of adequacy must be rejected.

I submit that the above passage suggests an argument that a new theorist could use to deny Frege's condition of adequacy. This argument claims that, given its particular approach to semantic matters, it is only natural that the new theory cannot resolve the problems of cognitive significance because it cannot capture the ways in which people think about the objects they talk about. Once you start thinking of semantics as a discipline dealing with the linguistic practices of human beings, it does not make sense to expect it to answer questions, such as "How do we think about the things we talk about?". For, these deal with processes which are, pace Fregean intuitions, far distant

from institutionalized linguistic practices.

Despite its deceiving simplicity, the validity of this reasoning rests on the acceptance of an assumption which is far from trivial. (B) expresses the above inference more explicitly:<sup>6</sup>

(B) P1. The new theory of reference is a semantics aiming at understanding the institutionalized conventions in accordance with which our terms refer.

P2. If a semantics aims at understanding the institutionalized conventions in accordance with which our terms refer, then it does not capture the ways in which speakers think of their referents.

P3. [tacit] If a semantics does not capture the ways in which speakers think of their referents, then it does not have any implication for the problems of cognitive significance.

C1. If a semantics aims at understanding the institutionalized conventions in accordance with which our terms refer, then it does not have any implication for the problems of cognitive significance.

C2. The new theory of reference is a semantics which does not have any implication for the problems of cognitive significance.

C2. denies Frege's condition of adequacy for it implies that there is at least one adequate semantics which does not explain the problems of cognitive significance. The inference from P2. to C1. and C2. requires P3, i.e., the assumption of a connection between capturing the ways in which speakers think about their referents and addressing the problems of cognitive significance. More precisely, it requires that if a semantics answers the problems of cognitive significance, then it also captures the ways in which speakers think about their referents. It is because the new theory does not capture the latter that it does not have any immediate implications for the former problems.

In two articles published after "Has Semantics Rested on a Mistake," (Wettstein [1988] and [1989]) Wettstein attacks the connection between cognitive significance and the content of speakers' minds:

[C]ognitive significance is not a matter of associated information. (Wettstein [1988] 156, [1991] 155)

[C]ognitive significance is not a matter of what is in the head. (Wettstein [1989] 330, [1991] 172)

Here, Wettstein denies some connection between cognitive significance and the content of speakers' minds, but it is not clear whether he is rejecting *any* connection between them. In particular, it is not clear whether this denial conflicts with the tacit premise of the previous argument, i.e., the claim that a semantics solves the problems of cognitive significance only if it captures the content of speakers' minds. The following passage more precisely denies one specific connection:

I have argued elsewhere against the Kaplan-Perry approach to the cognitive significance of indexicals [footnote: see Wettstein [1986]]. While I stressed there the Fregean flavor of that approach, I was not sufficiently focused upon what I now see as the most salient similarity with Frege, Kaplan's representationalism. Kaplan, no less than Frege, explains cognitive differences between expressions as differences in their associated modes of presentations. Here I want to urge that we abandon representationalism even in the study of the cognitive significance phenomena. (Wettstein [1988] 156, [1991] 154)

"Representationalism" is a feature of Fregean semantics that Wettstein traces back to a Cartesian influence. It is the idea that "[i]t is the representations-senses and not words-that refer in the primary instance." (Wettstein [1991] 138) Reworded in terms of "cognitive fix," this especially Cartesian point of view requires that some distinct mental content must provide the speakers with a "cognitive fix" on the things they refer to. Speakers must be able to discriminate the referents of their words mentally. In this quote, Wettstein acknowledges a change in his understanding of what he thought was wrong in the new theorists' approach to cognitive significance criticized in "Has Semantics Rested on a Mistake?", i.e., Kaplan and Perry's. Namely, he intends to reject any account which explains differences in cognitive content by appealing to differences between the corresponding mental representations.<sup>7</sup>

As specified, the new theorists' new thesis rejects any account, semantics included, which relies on a necessary connection between differences in the mental contents of the speakers and differences in the cognitive significance of the terms or sentences uttered by such speakers. This could be more perspicuously stated as (NT) "No adequate semantics accounts for the

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similarities and differences in the cognitive significance of terms and statements on the basis of, i.e., only if it captures, the similarities and differences between the mental contents of the speakers who utter such terms and statements.” Prima facie, this negative general statement is not in any immediate conflict with P3. which was stated as: “If a semantics does not capture the ways in which speakers think of their referents, then it does not have any implication for the problems of cognitive significance.” For, there is no mentioning in P3. of differences either in cognitive significance or in mental contents. However, it seems plausible to spell out this conditional as follows: “An adequate semantics accounts for the similarities and differences in the cognitive significance of terms and statements only if it captures the similarities and difference between the mental contents of the speakers who utter such terms and statements.” Thus stated, P3. is a general affirmative statement that is the contrary of (NT). If we assume either P3. or (NT) as true, then the other is false; hence, it is not possible to hold both of them as true. A new theorist cannot appeal to the truth of P3. to build a valid argument against Frege’s condition of adequacy and also support (NT) which divorces cognitive significance from mental contents.

In summary, I have argued that there is a conflict between one tacit assumption of an argument which a new theorist may use against Frege’s condition of adequacy and one more recent new theorists’ thesis. Ultimately, this conflict undermines one possible way of rejecting Frege’s condition of adequacy. This is a significant conclusion, because the denial of Frege’s condition of adequacy seemed to provide an alternative way of rejecting the original Fregean argument, i.e. (A), which denies that the new theory of reference is an adequate semantics because it cannot account for the puzzles of cognitive significance. If this conflict is real and my reasoning is correct, then it seems that, contrary to Wettstein’s suggestion in “Has Semantics Rested on a Mistake?”, there is no alternative for a new theorist who accepts the recent claim that cognitive significance has nothing to do with mental contents and who wants to reject the original Fregean argument but join Perry and Kaplan in their effort to reject not Frege’s condition of adequacy but rather the third premise of (A), i.e., prove that the new theory of reference has indeed within it the resources to account for the cognitive significance of language.

Let me review the line of reasoning discussed so far. By accepting Frege’s

view of language as intimately connected with thought,<sup>8</sup> the Fregeans are committed to require that any adequate semantics must explain all phenomena which arise from the ways in which speakers think about their referents. For this reason, since they also believe that explaining the ways in which speakers think of their referents suffices to provide a solution to the problems of cognitive significance, they behold Frege's condition of adequacy, i.e., expect any adequate semantics to be able to solve the problems of cognitive significance. But new theorists do not embrace Frege's connection between language and thought. Their view is anti-Fregean exactly because it replaces it with the connection between language and the world. Thus, if the problems of cognitive significance require explaining speakers' thinking processes, but semantics is not required to explain speakers' thinking processes, then new theorists can reject Frege's condition of adequacy.

Notice that in the above anti-Fregean reasoning, in order to infer that semantics must not deal with the problems of cognitive significance, we assume that the solution of these problems requires explaining the ways in which speakers think of their referents. This is the same tacit assumption needed to sustain the validity of argument (B), above. What happens to the above reasoning if this assumption is rejected, i.e., if we claim that cognitive significance may have nothing to do with the ways in which speakers think of their referents as suggested in (NT)? First of all, it is clear that new theorists can still reject the Fregean connection between language and thought. Moreover, given that it is not assumed that the problems of cognitive significance must be resolved by explaining the ways in which speakers think of their referents, these problems become again legitimate topic of investigation for new theorists. Unlike before, new theorists can now both reject the Fregean connection between language and thought and deal with the problems of cognitive significance. Hence, Frege's condition of adequacy may not need to be rejected any more.

It could be noted, however, that Frege's condition is now different from the thesis it was within the Fregean perspective. Separating the problems of cognitive significance from the speakers' thinking processes changes the nature of these problems for it is now at least conceivable to propose solutions to them which appeal to facts totally different from those which were appealed to before, such as historical chains or institutionalized linguistic practices.<sup>9</sup> If

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one thus reconstructs the new theorists' main argument, then there is a sense in which (NT) far from being in conflict with their original view actually ensues from it.<sup>10</sup>

In conclusion, in this paper, I argue that there is a tension between the original rejection of Frege's condition of adequacy as first presented in "Has Semantics Rested On A Mistake?" and one more recent and radical new theorist view which denies that matters concerning the cognitive significance of language are matters concerning speakers' thinking processes. I propose what I take to be the best solution of this tension available to the new theorists, and argue that, despite appearances to the contrary, this solution is faithful to their original intentions. If I am correct, new theorists may still need to deal with cognitive significance after all.<sup>11</sup>

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For a clear characterization of the contrast between neo-Fregeans and new theorists such as Kripke, see P. Maddy, *Realism in Mathematics*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1990, p. 38.

- <sup>2</sup> In this article, I discuss the last three essays reprinted in Wettstein [1991] which collects writings dating from 1979 to 1989. The remaining essays in Wettstein's collection, though interesting to understand the progressive development of his thought, are not directly relevant to my discussion. In quoting these articles, I provide first the pages of the original article and secondly the pages of the collection.
- <sup>3</sup> I do my best in the text to characterize the broad variety of cases that Wettstein is collecting under the label of *Frege's data*. The cases mentioned in Wettstein [1986] are slightly different from those discussed in Wettstein [1988] and [1989].
- <sup>4</sup> For example, Howard Wettstein seems also to reject the second conjunct of P2.: 'Although I can't discuss it here, it is less than obvious that the Fregean orientation does so well with "Frege's data."' 'Perry, especially in "The Problem of The Essential Indexical," argues convincingly that the Fregean orientation runs into severe problems even in the area of cognitive significance. These arguments of Perry, based upon the work of Hector-Neri Castañeda, ought to make us even more suspicious about Frege's epistemological condition of adequacy. Not even the Fregean orientation, motivated by such epistemological concerns, can provide the wanted epistemological results.' See footnotes 7 and 28 in Wettstein, [1991] 206 and 209. Elsewhere, Wettstein more generally argues: 'One philosopher's mystery is another's fundamental tool for clarification... It is interesting, in this connection, that the Fregean fundamental piece of intellectual apparatus, senses, is just what seems mysterious to the anti-Fregean. "What are these senses," we want to ask, 'and how in the world can anything have such a nonconventional satisfaction relation to a referent?'" Wettstein [1991] footnote 27, 225-6.
- <sup>5</sup> Wettstein groups Frege's views with the views of those he calls Fregeans. I disagree with his reading of Frege's views on thoughts. In my interpretation, Frege's views on thoughts are more Platonic than Cartesian for the connection between language and thought is independent of any mental intermediary. However, I agree with Wettstein that this is not crucial to his general argument. In footnote 11 in Wettstein [1988], he acknowledges that his reading of Frege may be controversial. But he adds, "many philosophers have expressed agreement with the philosophical views of my 'Frege', and we can thus speak of the 'Fregean tradition' even if, contrary to my view, Frege never did maintain this sort of outlook."
- <sup>6</sup> I realize that the conditionals in P2. and C1. of (B) significantly strengthen the original claims contained in the quoted passage, but I see no other way to make explicit and valid the inference merely hinted at in the original passage. Either we can extract a valid argumentation from such a passage or the mentioned inference will lose much of its significance.
- <sup>7</sup> Another statement of the same thesis is contained in the following passage:

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“Examples like Putnam’s elm-beech example and Kripke’s Gell-Mann-Feynman example indicate not only that *reference* is not a matter of what is in the head. They indicate just as clearly that (to take only a bit of a dramatic license) *cognitive significance* is not a matter of what is in the head. The names ‘Gell-Mann’ and ‘Feynman’, after all, are far from cognitively on a par, despite the lack of any difference in associated properties.” In fact, in the given example, we have sentences with distinct cognitive significance and yet identical mental contents, thus suggesting that a difference in mental contents is not a necessary condition for different cognitive significance. (Wettstein [1989] 330, [1991] 172).

- <sup>8</sup> I already noted my disagreement with Wettstein on Frege’s views on thoughts in footnote 5. I accept his characterization for the sake of reconstructing his argument accurately.
- <sup>9</sup> It is interesting to notice that some of Howard Wettstein’s recent writings contain attempts to sketch an alternative picture of language – Wettstein calls it “A Social, Naturalistic Alternative” in Wettstein [1988] - which might qualify as attempts to prove that the new theory of reference can explain cognitive significance but in a different way from how Perry and Kaplan have tried to do it.
- <sup>10</sup> Notice one last interesting point. If one interprets Frege’s views on semantics as Platonic rather than Cartesian, then even for Frege the adequacy of semantics does not require that solutions to the problems of cognitive significance explain the ways speakers think about their referents. Thus, there are at least two views which can accept Frege’s condition of adequacy but not require that semantics deal with speakers’ thinking processes: the Platonic Fregean view and the new theorist view.
- <sup>11</sup> I began working on this project during the NEH Summer Seminar “Language and Reality: Reference” directed by Richard Mendelshon at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York during the summer of 1994. I significantly profited from the comments of the participants in that seminar as well as from those of the audience of a talk I gave at the University of Vercelli in March 1996. I thank Paolo Casalegno, Michele Di Francesco, Paolo Leonardi, Diego Marconi, and Carlo Penco for their useful criticisms. Alberto Voltolini offered very insightful comments. I presented a more recent version of this paper at the Minnesota Philosophical Society meeting in October 1996 and at the meeting of the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association in March 1997. The comments of my commentators Wade Savage and James K. Derden, respectively, have helped to make this final version more clear. Finally, special thanks go to Lory Lemke, for his always stimulating suggestions.