

“On Experiencing Meanings”

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Introduction

Do we *perceptually experience* meanings? For example, when we hear an utterance of a sentence like ‘Bertrand is British’ or ‘I am a philosopher’ do we *hear* its meaning in the sense of being *auditorily* aware of it? Similarly, when we see inscriptions of these sentences, do we *see* their meanings in the sense of being *visually* aware of them?

Several philosophers like Tim Bayne and Susanna Siegel have suggested that we do (Bayne 2009: 390, Siegel 2006: 490-491, 2011: 99-100). They argue roughly as follows: 1) experiencing speech/writing in a language you are *incompetent* in is phenomenally different from experiencing speech/writing you are *competent* in; 2) this contrast is *best explained* by the fact that we experience meanings in the latter case, but not the former.

In contrast, in an important recent discussion Casey O’Callaghan has argued that we do not (O’Callaghan 2011). He first responds to the above contrast argument by claiming that this phenomenal contrast is instead best explained by the fact that we hear language-specific phonological properties in the latter case, but not in the former. And he then also provides a direct argument against hearing meanings relying on *homophony*.

My aim in this paper is to present a new case against experiencing meanings. I will first argue that although O’Callaghan’s response to the popular contrast argument works, it is too limited in scope. I will do this by developing a new contrast argument that focuses on experiencing speech/writing in a language you are merely *phonologically competent* in versus one you are also *semantically competent* in. This contrast argument is immune to O’Callaghan’s response because the relevant phenomenal contrast can’t be explained by the fact that we hear language-specific phonological properties only in the latter case (Sections 1-3) However, I will then also argue that once we get clear about what the issue is really about, we can

bolster O’Callaghan’s direct argument against experiencing meanings by giving a more general reason to doubt that we do. (Sections 4-5) This leaves us with an apparent dilemma. On the one hand we have a new contrast argument in favor of experiencing meanings that is immune to O’Callaghan’s response. However, on the other hand we have good reasons to doubt that we experience meanings. I will conclude by dissolving the dilemma by arguing that the new phenomenal contrast is best explained by thinking that the employment of semantic competence has itself either sensory phenomenal accompaniments or a distinctive cognitive phenomenology (Section 6). The upshot is that even the new contrast argument ultimately fails to establish that we experience meanings. Given that we’ve also shown that there are good reasons to doubt that we do experience meanings, it’s reasonable to conclude that we don’t.

1. The Initial Contrast Argument

Let’s start by taking a closer look at the popular contrast argument that motivates the claim that we experience meanings.¹ Consider the following pair of situations: in *S1* you can’t speak Estonian and have the perceptual experience of hearing an Estonian speaker utter the sentence ‘Kao minema!; in *S2* you’ve learnt Estonian and have the perceptual experience of hearing the same Estonian speaker utter the same sentence which, as you now know, is synonymous with ‘Get lost!’ in English. It seems evident that the overall experience *O1* had in *S1* of which the perceptual experience *E1* is a part and the overall experience *O2* had in *S2* of which the perceptual experience *E2* is a part differ in phenomenal character (for support of this claim, see the discussion in O’Callaghan 2011: 786-797). Following Susanna Siegel, the argument then proceeds as follows:

- (1) *O1* and *O2* differ in phenomenal character.

¹ An analogous argument is frequently used to motivate the claim that we experience natural and functional kind properties like *being a pine tree* or *being a stethoscope* (see Siegel 2006, 2011).

- (2) If *O1* and *O2* differ in phenomenal character, then *E1* and *E2* differ in phenomenal character.
- (3) Therefore, *E1* and *E2* differ in phenomenal character.
- (4) If *E1* and *E2* differ in phenomenal character, then *E1* and *E2* differ in which properties one perceptually experiences while having them.
- (5) Therefore, *E1* and *E2* differ in which properties one perceptually experiences while having them.
- (6) If *E1* and *E2* differ in which properties one perceptually experiences while having them, then *E1* and *E2* differ in whether one perceptually experiences the meaning of the utterance of ‘Kao minema!’ while having them.
- (7) Therefore, *E1* and *E2* differ in whether one perceptually experiences the meaning of the utterance of ‘Kao minema!’ while having them. (Compare Siegel 2006: 502, 2011: 100; O’Callaghan 2011: 792)

The conclusion entails that we can perceptually experience at least one utterance’s meaning. And since the argument could be run for utterances of other expressions in a similar way, one could conclude that we can perceptually experience their meanings as well.

The argument has three substantive and controversial premises which require defense: (2), (4), and (6). (2) can be supported by arguing that the best way to explain why *O1* and *O2* differ in phenomenal character is by taking *E1* and *E2* to differ in phenomenal character. In this case arguing for this is relatively easy since some of the most salient differences between *O1* and *O2* have to do with whether one hears word boundaries. And such perceptually salient differences in parsing are unlikely to be due to differences in non-

perceptual phenomenology or in background phenomenology pertaining to mood etc. (compare Siegel 2006: 492-497).

Similarly, (4) can be supported by arguing that the differences between *E1* and *E2* are not due to differences in non-representational aspects of phenomenology, if there are any. Again, this is relatively plausible since hearing word boundaries is clearly not a matter of a raw feeling of familiarity, even if there is such a thing (compare Siegel 2006: 497-498).

Finally, (6) must be supported by arguing that differences between *E1* and *E2* are not due to differences in experiencing non-semantic properties. As we will see in the next section, this is much more controversial because it's actually quite plausible that hearing word boundaries is a matter of experiencing phonological properties.

2. O'Callaghan's Response

The popular contrast argument takes off from an indisputable phenomenal contrast between two overall experiences and concludes that the best explanation of it is that in one case we hear meanings. Detractors could resist it by denying any of (2), (4), or (6), and by offering an alternative explanation of the contrast.² In an important recent discussion, Casey O'Callaghan grants the first two, but denies (6). More specifically, he argues that the best explanation of the phenomenal contrast is that after we've learned Estonian we hear certain language-specific phonological features (O'Callaghan 2011). Let's take a closer look.

O'Callaghan argues that every spoken language uses a set of audible "building blocks" or *phones* to build up further sounds. Phones are studied by phonetics and can be thought of as the smallest perceptible differences significant for a language. However, different spoken languages differ in which phones they use and which of the built up further sounds they treat as linguistically equivalent. Thus, every spoken language includes distinctive further sounds treated as linguistically equivalent or *phonemes*. Phonemes are studied by phonology and can be thought of as the minimal significant differences for a particular language. It

² Siegel's original argument has been resisted by rejecting each of the analogues of (2), (4), and (6). For example, for rejection of the premise equivalent to (2) see Brogaard 2013, Reiland 2014. And for rejection of the premise equivalent to (4) see Briscoe 2015, Brogaard 2013, Nanay 2011, Price 2009.

follows that utterances of expressions of a language have language-specific phonological features (O’Callaghan 2010: 312-319, 2011: 802-803). Furthermore, becoming competent with a particular language involves *learning* to hear utterances as having these phonological features (O’Callaghan 2011: 804-805). Thus, the best explanation for the phenomenal contrast in cases like the above is simply the fact that after we’ve learned a language like Estonian we hear the utterance of ‘Kao minema!’ as having these phonological features.

O’Callaghan’s claim that becoming competent with a language involves learning to hear language-specific phonological features is very plausible. I also think that his response works against the above popular contrast argument. However, I want to argue that it is too limited in scope. One reason why one might think this is that it covers only audition and it’s not clear whether and how it extends to vision. But this is not what I want to focus on. Instead, I want to show that it doesn’t even cover every case of audition by developing a new contrast argument.

3. A New Contrast Argument

The popular contrast argument contrasted cases of incompetence with a language with cases of *full* competence. However, competence with a language consists of different competences and comes in degrees. For example, due to taking classes in school I’m competent enough in Russian to parse speech into different words and can without effort read aloud in a way that sounds fine to the native speakers. Similarly, due to listening to a lot of Latin music I’m competent enough in Spanish to be able to sing along. Thus, we could say that I’m relatively *phonologically competent* in Russian and Spanish and could argue that I’m able to hear at least some of the language-specific phonological features. But my *semantic competence* is severely limited. Focusing on the consumption side, I can’t really understand most conversations between people who speak Russian or Spanish. Thus, this is a case where my taking classes in school or exposure to music has resulted in my becoming phonologically competent with Russian and Spanish while giving me a very limited semantic competence.

Lest you think this only happens with non-native languages, here's another example. I know people whose native language is Tagalog and who are clearly phonologically competent in it and can hear the language-specific phonological features. However, due to migrating at a young age and solely speaking English afterwards, their semantic competence with the language has considerably diminished over time. Thus, this is a case where solely speaking a different language has left the phonological competence with their native language intact while resulting in significant loss of semantic competence.

Here's a final, more systematic example. Opera singers who routinely sing in Italian are clearly phonologically competent with it. However, there is no need for them to also be semantically competent and many are not. Thus, this is a case where lots of people plausibly systematically acquire only phonological competence.

The fact that there are such cases suggests that we can arrive at a novel contrast argument by contrasting cases of phonological or otherwise partial competence (e. g. knowing how to read Cyrillic text) with cases of full competence including semantic competence. Thus, consider the following pair of situations: in $S3$ you have acquired phonological competence with Estonian, but not semantic competence and have the perceptual experience of hearing an Estonian speaker utter the sentence 'Kao minema!'; in $S4$ you've acquired full competence with Estonian and have the perceptual experience of hearing the same Estonian speaker utter the same sentence which, as you now know, is synonymous with 'Get out!' in English. It still seems evident that the overall experience $O3$ had in $S3$ of which the perceptual experience $E3$ is a part and the overall experience $O4$ had in $S4$ of which the perceptual experience $E4$ is a part differ in phenomenal character. Just like before, the argument now proceeds as follows:

- (1) $O3$ and $O4$ differ in phenomenal character.
- (2) If $O3$ and $O4$ differ in phenomenal character, then $E3$ and $E4$ differ in phenomenal character.

- (3) Therefore, *E3* and *E4* differ in phenomenal character.
- (4) If *E3* and *E4* differ in phenomenal character, then *E3* and *E4* differ in which properties one perceptually experiences while having them.
- (5) Therefore, *E3* and *E4* differ in which properties one perceptually experiences while having them.
- (6) If *E3* and *E4* differ in which properties one perceptually experiences while having them, then *E3* and *E4* differ in whether one perceptually experiences the meaning of the utterance of 'Kao minema!' while having them.
- (7) Therefore, *E3* and *E4* differ in whether one perceptually experiences the meaning of the utterance of 'Kao minema!' while having them.

The conclusion entails that we can perceptually experience at least one utterance's meaning. And since the argument could be run for utterances of other expressions in a similar way, one could conclude that we can perceptually experience their meanings as well.

The argument has again three substantive and controversial premises which require defense: (2), (4), and (6). (4) can be supported by arguing that the differences between *E3* and *E4* are not due to differences in non-representational aspects of phenomenology, if there are any. Again, this is at least somewhat plausible since understanding-related phenomenal differences don't seem to be a matter of a raw feeling of familiarity.

Similarly, (6) can be supported by arguing that differences between *E3* and *E4* are not due to differences in experiencing non-semantic properties. In contrast to the original argument, in this case arguing for this is relatively easy since the most salient differences between *O1* and *O2* have to do with whether one comprehends speech. And comprehension-related differences are unlikely to be due to differences in experiencing non-semantic properties.

Finally, (2) must be supported by arguing that the best way to explain why *O3* and *O4* differ in phenomenal character is by taking *E3* and *E4* to differ in phenomenal character. As we will see in the final section, this is much more controversial because it's quite plausible that comprehension-related differences are non-perceptual.

It should be clear that the availability of this new contrast argument shows that O'Callaghan's response is too limited in scope in not covering every case of audition. In response to the original argument O'Callaghan argued that the best explanation of the phenomenal contrast is that after we've learned Estonian we hear certain language-specific phonological features. Since in the case of the new argument the contrast can't be so explained it should be obvious that it is immune to O'Callaghan's response.

4. What Is the Issue About?

Thus far, I've argued that O'Callaghan's response to the popular contrast argument is too limited in scope by developing a new contrast argument which is immune to it. Let us now take a step back and consider what the issue is really about.

What does it mean to say that we experience meanings? From the point of view of mainstream philosophy of language, the question whether we can hear or see utterances' or inscriptions' meanings is somewhat ill-formed. It is widely agreed that it is *expression types* like sentences which have meanings, not particular acts of uttering/inscribing or produced utterances/inscriptions (Kaplan 1989). An expression type's meaning in a language is what semantically competent speakers have a grasp of. For example, the meaning of 'Bertrand is British' in English is what competent speakers of English have a grasp of. Furthermore, an expression's meaning is what makes it possible for competent speakers to *use* that expression to *speak* that language and perform locutionary speech acts like *saying* something or telling someone to do something.³ For example, the meaning of 'Bertrand is British' is what makes it possible for competent speakers to use that expression to speak English and say that

³ I'm relying here on Austin's distinction between locutionary speech acts like saying something or telling someone to do something vs. illocutionary speech acts like claiming, predicting, requesting, ordering etc. (Austin 1962).

Bertrand is British. This entails that talk of experiencing utterances' or inscriptions' "meanings" has to be recast in some different terms.

What could it then mean to say that we experience an utterance's or inscription's "meaning"? I think that there are two possibilities as to what's really meant.

First, one could mean that we experience the utterance/inscription as being *used to say* something or perform other locutionary speech acts. Suppose you have learnt Estonian and hear an Estonian speaker utter 'Kao minema!' which, as you now know, is synonymous with 'Get lost!' in English. The idea here is that when you hear her utterance of 'Kao minema!' you hear it as having the property of being used to tell someone, perhaps you, to get lost. Call this the *Speech Act* view.

Second, one could mean that what we experience are utterances as being tokens of or as belonging to an expression-type that has a particular meaning. Suppose again you have learnt Estonian and hear an Estonian speaker utter 'Kao minema!'. The idea here is that when you hear an utterance of that sentence you hear it as belonging to an expression-type that has a particular meaning. Call this the *Semantic* view.

These views are genuinely different. One reason is that it's commonly thought that only utterances and inscriptions of sentences can be used to *say* something or perform other locutionary speech acts. For example, you can't use a phrase 'edge of ice' by itself to say something. But then it's unlikely that we would experience an utterance of 'edge of ice' or other such phrases as having the property of being used to say something since all such experiences would be falsidical.⁴ Thus, on the *Speech Act* view we can at best only experience the "meanings" of utterances and inscriptions of *sentences*. In contrast, the *Semantic* view allows that we can also experience the "meanings" of utterances and inscriptions of sub-sentential expressions like words or phrases.

I think that this difference is also enough to show that what the proponents of experiencing meanings have had in mind is the *Semantic* view. Clearly, we can replace 'Kao

⁴ One might object that at least *certain* phrases can also be used to perform speech acts. For example, Robert Stainton has extensively argued that one can use the phrase 'moving pretty fast' to say of a boat that it is moving pretty fast. (Stainton 2006). Even if this is true, it's only some phrases in specific situations that can be used to perform locutionary acts. This suffices to establish the difference between the *Speech Act* view and the *Semantic* view.

minema!’ in the above argument with an Estonian phrase like ‘jäääär’ and still get the relevant phenomenal contrast. Thus, I think that the most plausible construal of what’s meant by the claim that we experience utterances’ or inscriptions’ meanings is that we experience them as belonging to expression types that have particular meanings. In the next section I will rely on this improved understanding of what it means to say that we experience meanings to give a general reason to doubt that we do.

5. Against Experiencing Meanings

It is time to look at O’Callaghan direct argument *against* experiencing meanings. He argues as follows. First, he claims that to convincingly show that we experience meanings we need a case where there’s a phenomenal contrast between experiencing same sounds or same strings of symbols belonging to expression types with different meanings. Second, he calls into question whether there are any such cases.

Consider *homophones*, expressions which don’t differ in pronunciation, but do differ in meaning. For a first example, consider three utterances of ‘pole’, ‘pole’ and ‘poll’ in the sense of a pole for pole vaulting, a place on the surface of Earth at its axis of rotation, and a vote. O’Callaghan claims that your auditory experience of hearing each utterance is clearly the same even if I tell you prior to each utterance which word I’m using and with which of its meanings I use it with. This makes it implausible that you experience them as belonging to a particular expression type with a particular meaning. For another example that goes beyond single word utterances consider utterances of structurally ambiguous sentences like ‘Visiting relatives can be boring’ or those with scope ambiguities like ‘Everyone loves someone’. Again, it’s implausible that you experience these as belonging to one or the other particular expression type with a particular meaning.

I think that O’Callaghan’s argument against experiencing meanings works. However, I also think that we can bolster it by giving a more general reason to doubt that we experience meanings.

Here's a natural philosophical picture of the steps involved in speech comprehension in a typical case of hearing an utterance of a sentence like 'Get lost!' in a language one is fully competent in.⁵ First, you hear some sounds, and, as O'Callaghan argues, plausibly hear them *as* particular phonemes. Second, you hear or otherwise recognize the sounds *as* utterances of particular words and sentences qua expression types. Third, you *employ* your *semantic competence* with the words and sentences qua expression types in a particular language. Finally, you couple this with the knowledge of the speech situation (e. g who the speaker is, location, time, and world of the utterance, addressee etc.) to figure out the locutionary act the speaker performed.⁶ For example, in the above case, you first hear the sounds, recognize it as the utterance of the expression type 'Get lost!', employ your semantic competence with 'Get lost!' in English, and then couple it with the knowledge of who the addressee is to figure out that the speaker told x to get lost where x = the addressee. Furthermore, you perhaps go from there to figure out what illocutionary act the speaker performed in telling x to get lost (e. g. whether she ordered x to get lost, or whether she was being merely ironic etc.) and whether she intended to communicate something else (e. g. that he is not welcome).

If we don't experience meanings then the above picture is complete. However, if we experience meanings then the above picture includes a further step. Namely, your employment of semantic competence has to also cognitively penetrate your auditory experience, causing you to hear the sounds as utterances of particular words and sentences qua expression types which have *particular meanings*.

Now, notice that the employment of semantic competence already suffices for speech comprehension which means that postulating the further step involving cognitive penetration is idle as far as explaining comprehension. I think that this shows that we need other reasons to postulate it. The only other such reason seems to be that it explains the

⁵ This is intended as a rational reconstruction of the steps involved, analogously to Grice's famous reconstruction of the inferential process in calculating implicatures (Grice 1989). Thus, it is at the level of task-analysis, if you will, and leaves open how this is computationally implemented. For example, the picture is neutral on whether the steps are carried out serially or in parallel.

⁶ Of course, this only happens when you hear a sentence, not a sub-sentential expression.

phenomenal contrast in the case of our new argument. It follows that if we could explain the contrast differently, it would be reasonable to conclude that we don't experience meanings.⁷

6. Dissolving the Dilemma

What we've done thus far leaves us with an apparent dilemma. On the one hand we have a new contrast argument in favor of experiencing meanings that is immune to O'Callaghan's response. However, on the other hand we also have good reasons to doubt that we experience meanings. In this section I will dissolve the dilemma by arguing that the new phenomenal contrast is best explained by appealing to our employment of semantic competence which has itself either sensory phenomenal accompaniments or a distinctive cognitive phenomenology.

The new contrast argument started with the following pair of situations: in *S3* you have acquired phonological competence with Estonian, but not semantic competence and have the perceptual experience of hearing an Estonian speaker utter the sentence 'Kao minema!'; in *S4* you've acquired full competence including semantic competence and have the perceptual experience of hearing the same speaker utter the same sentence. It seems evident that the overall experience *O3* had in *S3* of which the perceptual experience *E3* is a part and the overall experience *O4* had in *S4* of which the perceptual experience *E4* is a part differ in phenomenal character. And this cries out for an explanation.

It's clear that *O3* and *O4* differ in that *O4* has a part, your employment of semantic competence that *O3* lacks. Furthermore, it's also clear that the fact that only *O4* involves

⁷ Here's a worry about this argument. Consider the following "doxastic" picture of kind classification. First, you see an object and its low-level properties like color and shape. Second, you access your background belief to the effect that an object with such and such color and shape properties belongs to a particular kind. Third, you infer from seeing the object and its low-level properties together with the background belief that this particular object belongs to the relevant kind. Above I claimed that the fact that employment of semantic competence is sufficient for speech comprehension shows that we need other reasons to think that it further penetrates your auditory experience causing you to experience meanings. Do I think that the fact that in the present case drawing the inference suffices for kind classification also shows that we need other reasons to think that the inference further penetrates the experience, causing you to experience kind properties? Yes, that's exactly what I think. However, I also think that the doxastic picture is falsified by other considerations. For discussion of the doxastic picture and alternatives see Bayne 2009: 395-396, Reiland 2015. Thanks to Dan Cavedon-Taylor for pressing me to clarify this.

your employment of semantic competence is the reason why it has a richer phenomenal character. Why is this?

I think the most obvious explanation is that the employment of semantic competence leads to a richer phenomenal character simply because it has *itself* a phenomenology. There are two different ways to defend this idea, both familiar from the debate over cognitive phenomenology. On the more conservative view, we could say that the employment of semantic competence comes with sensory phenomenal accompaniments like a feeling of familiarity or some sort of imagery (Robinson 2005, Tye&Wright 2011). On the more liberal view we could say that the employment of semantic competence has itself a distinctive cognitive phenomenology (Chudnoff 2015, Siewert 2011). And it doesn't matter here which view is right since both allow that the employment of semantic competence has itself a phenomenology.

Now, contrast this explanation with the explanation in terms of experiencing meanings. On the former explanation the phenomenal contrast is taken to be due to the fact that employment of semantic competence has itself a phenomenology. On the explanation in terms of experiencing meanings, it's taken to be due to the supposed fact that the employment of semantic competence cognitively penetrates the perceptual experience, leading to an experience of meanings with the accompanying sensory-perceptual phenomenology. It should be clear that the first explanation is considerably more parsimonious since it doesn't introduce otherwise explanatorily idle cognitive penetration. Thus, absent any reason to resist it should be the default one.

Is there any reason to resist the first explanation? It looks like the only way to resist it is by giving us reasons to doubt that that employment of semantic competence comes with sensory phenomenal accompaniments or a distinctive cognitive phenomenology. However, such wholesale doubt is hard to justify. After all, even those who fight tooth and nail against cognitive phenomenology all allow that cognitive states have sensory phenomenal accompaniments of the sort we've mentioned (Robinson 2005, Tye&Wright 2011).

The upshot is that even the new contrast argument ultimately fails to establish that we experience meanings. Given that we've also shown that there are good reasons to doubt that we do experience meanings, it's reasonable to conclude that we don't.⁸

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