

Engaging Putnam

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Contents

List of Abbreviations — VII

James Conant

An Introduction to Hilary Putnam — 1

Sanjit Chakraborty

Introduction to this Volume — 47

Joshua R. Thorpe and Crispin Wright

Putnam's Proof Revisited — 63

Sanjit Chakraborty

**Language, Meaning, and Context Sensitivity: Confronting a
"Moving-Target" — 89**

Sanford C. Goldberg

Externalism and the First-Person Perspective — 107

Gary Ebbs

Putnam on Trans-Theoretical Terms and Contextual Apriority — 131

Tim Button

Mathematical Internal Realism — 157

Tim Maudlin

The Labyrinth of Quantum Logic — 183

Roy T. Cook

Fulfillability, Instability, and Incompleteness — 207

Martha C. Nussbaum

Putnam's Aristotle — 227

Mario De Caro

Davidson and Putnam on the Antinomy of Free Will — 249

Duncan Pritchard

Putnam on Radical Scepticism: Wittgenstein, Cavell, and Occasion-Sensitive Semantics — 263

Yemima Ben-Menahem

Natural Laws and Human Language — 289

Maximilian de Gaynesford

Balance in *The Golden Bowl*: Attuning Philosophy and Literary Criticism — 309

Bibliography — 331

Contributors — 349

Index — 353

List of Abbreviations

AA	<i>Kant's gesammelte Schriften</i> (Akademieausgabe)
AE	Attitude Externalism
AI	Artificial Intelligence
APA	American Philosophical Association
BIV	Brain in a vat
CA	Capabilities Approach
CLT	Categorical Level-Theory
LT	Level-Theory
LT _{int}	Level-Theory, internalized
MIPOV	Metaphysical Independence of One's Point of View
MIT	Massachusetts Institute of Technology
MP	Methodological Principle
MT	Model Theory
MT _{int}	Model Theory, internalized
OC	Ludwig Wittgenstein, <i>On Certainty</i>
PA	Peano Arithmetic
PA _{int}	Peano Arithmetic, internalized
PI	Ludwig Wittgenstein, <i>Philosophical Investigations</i>
PS	Proof System
RHF	Hilary Putnam, <i>Realism with a Human Face</i>
SA	Spatial Autonomy
TTC	Hilary Putnam, <i>The Threefold Cord</i>
UCLA	University of California, Los Angeles
WL	Hilary Putnam, <i>Words and Life</i>
ZF	Zermelo-Fraenkel set theory

Sanjit Chakraborty

Language, Meaning, and Context Sensitivity: Confronting a “Moving-Target”

Abstract: This paper explores three important interrelated themes in Putnam’s philosophy: language, meaning, and the context-sensitivity of “truth-evaluable content.” It shows how Putnam’s own version of semantic externalism is able to steer a middle course between an internalism about meaning that requires a “language of thought” (or “mentalese”) and a mind-independent realism about meaning that requires Platonic objects (or other such “abstract entities”), while doing justice to how ascriptions of meaning are causally related to the objective world. The following account is able to allow for the primacy of language over thought while ensuring that the content of thought is partially fixed by the external world. The emphasis in Putnam’s later writings on the “context sensitivity” of meaning are often construed as marking a major departure from his earlier thought. It is here argued that such an interpretation involves a misunderstanding both of the commitments of Putnam’s original form of semantic externalism and of the implications of the version of context sensitivity he embraces.

In his book *Renewing Philosophy*, Putnam claims, “A central part of human intelligence is the ability to make inductive inferences, that is, to learn from experiences.”¹ Chomsky and his followers believe in the conceptual aspect of thought and Chomsky refutes the idea that the content of a thought can be the same as the meaning of the sentence by arguing in favor of a cognitive account of linguistic competence.² He articulates the method of language use in terms of the rule-governed processes that seem innate, while Fodor, at an intense level, safeguards the innate “language of thought.” For Fodor, all expressions and concepts of human being that are used in our natural language are in liaison with the primitive thought, which precedes language by leading towards the doctrine of innateness. Chomsky does not support as extreme a view as Fodor does.³ Instead, Chomsky believes in an ample number of concepts and conceptual abilities that we can express through innate language. He is reluctant to make any distinction

1 Hilary Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 8.

2 Noam Chomsky, “Problems of Projection,” *Lingua* 130 (2013): 33–49.

3 Jerry Fodor, *Language of Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979). See Sanjit Chakraborty, *The Labyrinth of Mind and World: Beyond Internalism-Externalism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 195–196.

between innate abilities and innate concepts. However, Putnam rejects Chomsky's thesis and says,

The view that language learning is not really learning, but rather the maturation of an innate ability in a particular environment (somewhat like the acquisition of a bird call by a species of bird that has to hear the call from an adult bird of the species to acquire it, but which also has an innate propensity to acquire that sort of call) leads, in its extreme form, to pessimism about the likelihood that human use of natural language can be successfully stimulated on a computer – which is why Chomsky is pessimistic about projects for natural language computer processing, although he shares the computer model of the brain, or at least of the “language organ,” with AI researchers.⁴

Chomsky, who believes in the computer model of brain in some particular areas, does not believe that artificial intelligence can attain the level of biological adaptation. For Chomsky, “language use” is not a separate ability of human beings like throwing a cricket ball. In the case of “language use,” an agent needs to undergo the process of total human intelligence capacity, whereas, in order to throw a cricket ball, one does not require to stimulate total human intelligence capacities. This is a very controversial topic where, I think, Putnam misunderstood Chomsky, as Chomsky has repeatedly argued that the computational model works only for the generative grammar in I-language in the context of parsing a program that determines the structure of presented expressions, and is not related to the system of language use. Chomsky also believes in the “creative aspect of language use” that is different from the way a computer processes language. The believers, in the theory of the innateness of language, like Chomsky or some other internalists (Devitt, Fodor, and Jackson) think that thought precedes language in three different senses:

- (1) Conceptual competence is ontologically prior to linguistic competence. We cannot take on conceptual competence without developing the capacity to acquire linguistic competence.
- (2) Linguistic competence is an amalgam of conceptual competence and processing competence. Hence, we should distinguish between conceptual capacities and processing capacities. The merit of the processing capacity can, thus, be considered as a tool of thought. Besides, there are some philosophers like Pinker, who takes “processing capacity” as an adaptation (something that was selected for), but this view is rejected by both Chomsky and Putnam who claim that if we consider linguistic competence as an

⁴ Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy*, 15.

adaptation, it will follow that conceptual capacity can be prior to it because of this adaptation.⁵

- (3) Unless we admit linguistic capacity as an adaptation, an analysis of exploring processing capacity in relation to linguistic competence would not execute anything until it is coped with conceptual capacity.

Conceptual competences are interrelated to certain thoughts that cannot adapt to suitable reasoning. An ontological priority defines conceptual competence as prior to linguistic competence. The best explanation of this theory is found in the behavioral attributes of animals, as animals do not possess language by which they can express their thoughts. Even in psychology, it is well proven that babies who do not speak any spoken natural language, have a very rich mental life like that of the higher-level animals, which may remind us that our ancestors (apes) had thoughts, but no language per se. Thought, no doubt, precedes language, as thought cannot pervade language.

However, Putnam would not like to put “psychological states” in the brain in retrospect of language by treating the environment as the primary cause of psychological states. Rather, through language, agents can make a sense of the world that affects us. Putnam accepts language use to be competent to identify “concepts,” by putting forth his hypothesis that underscores the primacy of language over thought. Concepts are in no sense Platonic objects. Having concepts means an ability to use words in our linguistic communication. Putnam seems to agree with Fodor in the fact that only syntax is formed in the brain, but semantics locate in the world, as language is an art that the world creates, and this is entirely different from an individual’s brain.

Language speaking is a human ability that one cannot theoretically explicate by piecemeal procedures. It is rather allied to complete “human functional organization.” The “constitutive fact” about the natural kind terms like “human being” or “hydrogen atoms” is not the same, since they stipulate different explanatory models. The inquiry about “hydrogen atoms” depends on an intelligible explanatory theory that bestows importance on natural science. However, language speaking and other human abilities that are linked to the system of language fall outside the realm of naturalistic inquiries. Neither neuroscience nor the mental approach helps us to learn anything about meanings. “Human being” as a concept can be a part of our human understanding mainly based on common sense and particular human actions and attitudes. And the same process is followed in the case of language speaking.

⁵ Chakraborty, *The Labyrinth of Mind and World*, 67.

Of significance here is that when a person believes something, the meaning of their belief cannot be an isolated thing that can only exist in their mind. If I believe that I have a mole under my eye, I tend to believe, at the same time, that there are people with moles under their eyes, just like me. The conception of others' claims for the concepts and beliefs from a non-intrinsic sense; these are external and publicly shareable in our language. It could hardly be possible that people can think and write the meaning of a sentence without intending this relation to the certain beliefs of the others. Putnam upholds language as a social phenomenon, so the intentions, beliefs and conventional meaning rely on the socio-linguistic framework and the public shareability of meaning.⁶

Putnam seems right in that there may be a possible way in which language precedes thought. In order to make a distinction between justified and unjustified thoughts we have to take language as an implement. In the case of a pre-linguistic organism, we do not make such a distinction. I think that, even when thought is in the form of a proposition (even in an interrogative sense), it can have a justification derived from language and previous experience. The perception and visual processes have some tendencies to be reformulated in verbal propositions and these verbal propositions, in the way of thought, need language to give it a structural milieu. Chomsky himself believes that one's thought about how one could avoid a traffic jam does not hinge on any linguistic competence but rather on the visual imagery. This is a farfetched justification, unless and until we reformulate it verbally. Even the plan that an agent envisages acquires its meaning through other related cognitive capabilities of the agent's *I-language*. But, the conceptions of driving a car or how to avoid a traffic jam are not bound by mere visual imagery or innate rules. Rather the processes are related to rules that are applied by people and also by their instant common senses which can be achieved through practices and experiences from one's community.⁷

In *Reality and Representation*,⁸ Putnam, who always tends toward realism, tries to endorse externalism from a scientific background by claiming that people's beliefs or knowledge can change but the referent of the words or terms remain unchanged.⁹ Putnam tries to make a link between the word and the world

⁶ See, in particular, Sanjit Chakraborty, "Pursuits of Belief: Reflecting on the Cessation of Belief," *Sophia* 60, no. 3 (2021): 639–654.

⁷ I am personally indebted to Noam Chomsky for these thought-provoking notes.

⁸ Hilary Putnam, *Representation and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988).

⁹ I wrote elsewhere, "Putnam raises a severe objection against Popper by defending the account of primary practices in science as any scientific ideas conduit its practical application in science, technology, and human life. Even in our practice, we could find out the correctness or the failures of an idea to see its successful long run practice or its unsuccessful and

to rebuff any kind of mentalism and *Platonic entities*.¹⁰ The logical positivists, especially Carnap, strive to reconstruct the understanding of language in terms of scientific methods (physics plus mathematics) and the synthetic formulation of logical consequences.¹¹ In contrast, terms like virus, quark, or gene, which are not perceivable, are labeled as theoretical terms. The dualism of observational terms and theoretical terms puts forward a kind of intricacy in philosophy of mind and language. Logical positivists sketch an overpass between statements of the status of verification with the theoretical one by arguing that an observational statement can be directly verified, whereas a theoretical statement is indirectly verifiable. They talk about a hierarchy between the two statements. The observational statements are fully meaningful and intelligible, even as the theoretical statements turn out to be partially meaningful with the help of the observational statements.¹² In his early years (1950s), Putnam shows that Carnap makes the wrong effort to integrate the false assumptions regarding the dependence relation between theoretical statements and observational statements. We know that, first, a strict challenge came from Quine in 1951, where he analyzed the marginal boundary between theoretical statements and observational statements of our language using the notion of meaning and the dependence of truth-values.¹³ In his article “What Theories Are Not,”¹⁴ Putnam concludes that it would not be a justified to think that the meaning of theoretical terms depends

insignificant application in our daily life. The whole process of knowing the significant or insignificant practices of the theories or ideas in the private life of the human could be understood only based on experience.” (Sanjit Chakraborty, “Scientific Conjectures and the Growth of Knowledge,” *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research* 38, no. 1 (2021): 97)

10 Hilary Putnam, “The Meaning of ‘Meaning’,” in *Mind, Language and Reality: Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 222.

11 Rudolf Carnap, *The Logical Syntax of Language* (New York: Humanities, 1937).

12 Rudolf Carnap, *The Philosophical Foundation of Physics*, edited by Martin Gardner (New York: Basic Books, 1966).

13 Travis writes, “Quine supposes that there is a class of privileged facts. Quine is prepared to tell us what these facts are. Roughly, they are what is ‘really’ observable as to how things are. There may then be, he allows, other nonprivileged or not obviously privileged facts only so far as these are analyzable in terms of privileged facts . . . (Quine supposes a notion of proof such that the obtaining of what proves a nonprivileged fact leaves no logical possibility of that fact’s nonobtaining. So in effect, what is demanded is that, for any nonprivileged fact, there be some set of privileged ones that are logically equivalent to it.) Ultimately, for Quine, the privileged facts are facts about our own sensations.” (Charles Travis, “Engaging,” in *The Philosophy of Hilary Putnam*, edited by Randall E. Auxier, Douglas R. Anderson, and Lewis Edwin Hahn (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2015), 284–285)

14 Hilary Putnam, “What Theories Are Not” (1960), reprinted in *Mathematics, Matter and Method: Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 1, 215–227 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

on observational terms. Now, one can question: how could we derive the meaning of the unperceivable terms like “quark,” “gene” etc.? In this case, Putnam accepts a function-based approach that talks about the linguistic practices that specify the way of learning the terms in our society. The meaningfulness of a term, for Putnam, can be determined through the common language. A term means how it is used and expressed in our ordinary language. This approach of finding out meaningfulness of the terms through causal links underpins theoretical terms in the periphery of common language. We can say that Quine tries to see the agreement or disagreement of linguistic practices in relation to logical incompatibility. For Quine, two sentences would exhibit disagreement only if there is a logical incompatibility between them. Moreover, these sentences would be in agreement only if there is a conjunction of the sentences, which allows for the assertion of the negation of the particular sentence that talks about an inconsistency between the assertions expressed by the two original sentences. All these deflationary accounts avert us from the notion of an agreement and disagreement between the speakers regarding practical identification. Here, two speakers in the same natural language believe each other’s words as true and justified without any special query. The practices that teach us to treat others’ words as significant make an integration of our understanding of truth with the understanding of sameness of denotation and satisfaction. Language, for Putnam, is an art that we can share through practices and uses. With this point in mind, Putnam urges that the competent speaker does not have any semantic marker (an intrinsic natural system to exhibit meaning) in their brain as Katz argued.¹⁵ Meaning becomes public because of similar paradigms, not because of shared knowledge. According to Putnam, an individualistic conception of knowledge cannot be possible at all. Every speaker needs a standard minimum account of information about the used words through which they can be able to participate in any kind of collective discussion in linguistic community.

I Putnam on Meaning

The concept of language, and the way Putnam tries to see language, is clearly related to his “theory of meaning,” an externalist appraisal. Putnam’s doctrine

¹⁵ Hilary Putnam, “Explanation and Reference” (1973), reprinted in *Mind, Language, and Reality: Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 204.

of “causal theory of reference”¹⁶ gets a full-fledged form of externalism in his brilliant paper “The Meaning of ‘Meaning’” (1975) which is a challenge to the popular idea of science. In this paper, he argues that, by claiming change in the beliefs in favor of scientific progress, one cannot change the meaning and the referent of terms. Putnam’s semantic externalism, a seminal contribution to the history of analytic philosophy, specially puts forward the argument that the meaning cannot be ambiguous, and that psychological states (intentional form) cannot determine the physical states (extension), as the knowledge of meaning is in no way an individual property (in a *Platonic sense*), which locates in the agent’s brain or mind. If we positively describe Putnam’s semantic externalism, we arrive at three interconnecting arguments that underlie his claims to externalism. The first claim brings up the notion of meaning just by avoiding mental entities. It is in fact the world oriented that mainly signifies by its reference. The second claim talks about a grasp of meaning that cannot be intrinsic; it exists in the public or social sphere. Finally, the third claim holds that concepts and beliefs, including meaning, can be determined by manifold ways connected with “socio-linguistic” background, “division of linguistic labor,” and “stereotypes.” Putnam blends these three elements (division of linguistic labor, stereotypes, and socio-linguistic background together) by calling them *meaning-vectors*.¹⁷ In a deep foundational sense, Putnam minimally defends a sentence component that he calls *meaning vector*, which he sensitively designates as “myth-eaten,” a picture of meaning that contrasts with the internalist claims about knowing the meaning of a term, which is just a matter of being in a certain psychological state. Mental states and mind as a manipulation of meaning cannot be intrinsic or located in the head or in the speaker’s skin. In his *John Locke* lectures (1975–76), Putnam discusses a richer version of the causal theory of reference that he calls “social co-operation plus contribution of the environment of the theory of specification of reference.”¹⁸

More generally, Putnam has charged Frege with some explicit allegations. However, he agrees with Fregean thought on certain points. Putnam first argues against Frege’s speculation on intentions as abstract entities and “mock proper names.” Secondly, though Putnam appreciates Frege’s stance on “anti-

16 Hilary Putnam, “The Psychological Predicates,” in *Art, Mind and Religion*, edited by W.H. Capitan and D.D. Merrill, 37–48 (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1967). Reprinted as “The Nature of Mental States,” in *Mind, Language and Reality: Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 2, 429–440 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

17 Putnam, “The Meaning of ‘Meaning’,” 269.

18 Noam Chomsky, *The New Horizons in the Study of Language and Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 41.

psychologism” – an inspiration for his thought that meanings cannot be mental entities that can be publicly sharable – he argues that Fregean analysis of “anti-psychologism” seems quite weak. Frege’s argument against psychologism is actually an argument against mental concepts in particular instead of abstract entities in general.¹⁹

The dilemma that verificationists cherished (except Quine) is that if we admit the desirable theory of “linguistic meaning,” it goes towards the adherence theory, which sounds close to “the network theory of meaning.” One could emphasize that any considerable amendment of the total theory also entails a consequent change of the constituent words and statement that are associated with the theory. However, a realist does not face such a dilemma. They consider that the change of meaning does not entail a subsequent change of reference. Putnam accepts this, but worries about the claim of realism regarding references that are determined by “Platonic entities” or intensions (the mentalese approach). Rather he claims that, in science, there are some cases in which belief about the referents can change instead of the knowledge of the terms. In this case, Putnam thinks that an amendment of the implicit meaning of a term like “chlorophyll” would be unable to bring about a consequent change to the explicit belief associated with it, that being of the referent “tree.” From 1960 onwards, Putnam tried to advocate a way out of the worry, for example, of how the meaning and reference of a term could assist in the development of scientific theories. Another problem is that the conception of an unchanging definition of a term that could allow its reference to be fixed cannot be error free. We find a causal and referential link between what terms refer to and its unchanging definition. In this case, the reference is fixed by the physical world and not by any mental process. This leads to Putnam’s celebrated externalist plea, “Cut the pie any way you like, ‘meaning’ just ain’t in the head.”²⁰

In the first case, in order to know the inner construction of a natural kind term, we do not know the paradigmatic instances of the entities through an ostensive definition or mere description of properties. Here the “stereotype” of the term can be easily perceptible, which helps to inform the speaker about the common and distinctive features of the terms that they perceive. The functionally based externalist approach that Putnam once espoused (1960–75)²¹ mainly eliminates the thesis that knowing a term occurs through its mere description. For him the process of ‘knowing’ may be possible because of its referent and ability

¹⁹ Sanjit Chakraborty, *Understanding Meaning and World: A Relook on Semantic Externalism* (New Castle and London: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), 16.

²⁰ Putnam, “The Meaning of ‘Meaning’,” 227.

²¹ Putnam, “The Psychological Predicates” and *Mind, Language and Reality: Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), xiii–xiv.

to use these in our linguistic systems. There is even mutual understanding and co-operation between non-professionals and the experts regarding the terms in our language use. Putnam considers the background of this co-operation as the “socio-linguistic background,” which leads to a hypothesis of universality, later popularly known as the “division of linguistic labor” and which discards “knowledge as persona.” Putnam adds that natural kind terms decipher to fix reference, which he says, the “shared paradigm,” i.e., a kind of agreement amongst the community members. This stereotype or “shared paradigm” can partly fix the meaning of a term, while the other parts of the same paradigm may be fixed by the scientific research to find out the decisive aspect, which categorizes the reference of the natural kind term, as in the case of the term “water” which means H_2O (two hydrogen atoms bonded with one oxygen atom).

Putnam’s talk about the “division of linguistic labor” in his theory of meaning considers that a speaker is fully competent in the use of language concerning the relevance of words and sentences. It illustrates that the meaning should be implicitly known, and the whole process is called the *constraint of publicity*. My understanding of Putnam makes it incumbent upon a fully competent speaker, one who has the ability to use their own words pertinently, to understand the expressions of the other members’ words properly of their linguistic community. This process may depend on the subject’s interaction with others in the same community who vary in interests, capacities and expertise. The practical ability of a speaker to engage in linguistic behavior may have relevance here. There will be a problem of requirement of meaning in the case of beliefs. Moreover, if any of my beliefs change, the meanings of my words will also change simultaneously. Therefore, the question would be whether the understanding of the meaning of a sentence depends on the process of understanding the general belief of the community or not. Putnam emphasizes the linguistic sense of meaning. An agent can understand the meaning of a sentence in terms of the beliefs that constitute the stereotypes being associated with the words. Here, an agent does not have to believe the stereotypes, but they should be able to recognize them *as* stereotypes. The crucial point is that for Putnam, most of the beliefs of an agent can change without any change in the meaning of an agent’s word, as in the case of photosynthesis and stereotypes of trees. Another important concern is that the meaning of an agent’s word does not rely on the agent themselves, but on the community they belong to. Putnam believes that if a person forgets the stereotype of a natural kind term or non-natural kind term, it does not show that the word changed its meaning. Rather, the speaker or the agent has forgotten or made a mistake about what the meaning of the word is. Now, what would be the position of words in communication? The shareability method of beliefs that remains context sensitive since it deals with the matter of common sense or the general intelligence. The

idea of “grasping of meaning” in our communication is powerful but also sounds like *Platonic entities*. If we talk about the complete or partial understanding of the meaning of a term, it falls into the realm of the *Platonic idea* of understanding. Putnam considers, “Meanings are not a function of what we believe, but at most of what is stereotypical” as meaning is world involving component that the speaker possesses. That is a key point of “The Meaning of ‘Meaning’.”²²

I think that ordinary people have a partial grasp of the meaning of a natural kind term like “water” or “tree,” but the comprehensive grasp of the meaning of the natural kind term can only be well identified by the experts. My point is that there is a gradation of the criteria of experts or of the knowledge of experts that can be verified as it gradually increases over the course of time and social change.²³ For me, the picture of communication is relied on the meaning and I agree with Putnam that the meaning is not any entity in the *Platonic sense*. However, the communication system and the linguistic sense of using words are causally linked to the contexts and common sense of individuals. Speakers are not bound by any semantic rules. The meaning of a sentence and the content of our thoughts rely on a particular occasion of use that looks contextually sensitive with our understandings. In this sense, the idea of comprehensive grasp of meaning and the partial grasp of meaning are significant. Ordinary people, through observational properties can give an “operational definition” of a word that may go towards “context sensitivity.” In this context, their understanding has various syntactic structures that are associated with the description of the sentences. Even for me, the “knowing how” process of linguistic practice is very close to context sensitivity. If we claim that the meaning is context sensitive rather than truth conditions itself (Putnam will disagree), then it would be reasonable to argue that comprehensive and partial grasp of meaning could both be possible and this thesis also leads to one of indeterminacy of meaning since we do not have any concrete idea of meaning except its reference. I am well aware that the reference fixation of a term as “water” does not hinge on the comprehensive meaning of the term “water” for a layman. In fact, the common belief and the succession of the belief procedures that we named as “reference borrowing” have taken a significant role as a prerequisite. The interesting point that Putnam raised is that “what the speakers had to be causally linked to ‘is the correct extension’ not the correct description of the extension. Moreover, extensions, as opposed to descriptions of extensions, are not things we grasp with our minds; they

²² I am indebted to Hilary Putnam for this personal correspondence.

²³ Chakraborty, *The Labyrinth of Mind and World*, 122.

are out there in the world.”²⁴ I strongly agree with his point in favor of semantic externalism, which is coping with “meaning vectors” cum “knowing how” processes in which “division of linguistic labor” along with the meaning on the constraint of publicity also take a relatable part.

A note to remember is that, here, the meaning for Putnam is “speaker’s meaning” not the meaning that linguists apprehended in their own sphere. Putnam does not admit that the knowledge of one’s belief and the meaning of the term are context sensitive. Let me discuss these issues in the last section of my paper, in which I focus on Putnam’s position on context sensitivity.

II Putnam on Content and Context Sensitivity

A significant recent development in Putnam’s philosophy has been the towards “occasion sensitive” semantics, in which content, truth and meaning play in significant roles. In this period, Putnam declined to treat content as related to the meaning of a sentence, since content is unable to determine the truth condition of the sentence. Putnam favors “truth-evaluable content,”²⁵ which cannot be regarded as a meaning of the sentence. The truth-evaluable content essentially assists to disambiguate the sentences on particular occasions. Putnam writes, “The thesis of contextualism is that in general the truth-evaluable content of sentences depends both on what they mean (what a competent speaker knows prior to encountering a particular context) and on the particular context, and not on meaning alone.”²⁶ For Putnam, “truth-evaluable content” relies on context sensitivity plus speakers’ meaning rather than on dictionaries’ meanings, which are actually “forms of descriptions,” prioritized by linguists. Meanings provided by dictionaries are incapable of resolving what exactly the “truth-evaluable content” of a sentence is in a given context. One thing is very clear here, namely that Putnam does not consider that meanings are individuated or determined by the

²⁴ We have a very fascinating dialogue in detail on this issue that is available on Hilary Putnam’s own blog: <http://putnamphil.blogspot.com>.

²⁵ Putnam writes, “I call these understandings ‘truth-evaluable contents’ (this is my terminology, not Travis’) because in the contexts we (very roughly) described they are typically sufficiently precise to be evaluated as true or false. (Note that even a vague sentence – ‘He stood roughly there’ – can often be evaluated as true or false *given an appropriate context*. But it is also the case that these ‘contents’ themselves admit of further specification, admit of different understandings in different contexts.” Hilary Putnam, *Philosophy in an Age of Science*, edited by Mario De Caro and David Macarthur (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 497.

²⁶ Putnam, *Philosophy in an Age of Science*, 496.

truth conditions. Putnam fixes the meaning in the sense of externalism and he thinks that the (possible) truth conditions of the sentence have changed depending on the context of the issues.

Once in a discussion, I asked Putnam, “If a person accepts the notion of content as ‘*shadow*,’ it could not be the meaning of a sentence. Now the question is, how could it be compatible with the context?” (Since the meaning and context of use can assign a “truth-evaluable content” of a sentence as Putnam himself claimed.)

Putnam answered me that, for him, the question of meaning and context assigned to “a truth condition of a sentence” seemed extremely convoluted. Putnam said,

To explain why, let me use an analogy. In a context (or, as Travis prefers to say, on a particular occasion of use), a noun, say, an automobile, refers to, say, particular objects that we drive, ride in, etc. But, to say that it does that because the meaning plus the context “assign a reference condition to the noun,” would be to adopt a particular metaphysical picture, on which mental entities such as the empiricists’ “ideas,” or entities such as Husserl’s “noemata” (that pertains to a supposed transcendental ego), or perhaps Platonic entities such as Frege’s *Sinne* (translated as “intensions” sometimes) determine a “reference condition” whose satisfaction, in turn, determines what “automobile” refers to. This inserts a “shadow” (the “reference condition”) between the noun and the automobiles. This is a pseudo-explanation. That is why Wittgenstein regarded all of these mental, or transcendental-mental, or Platonic and mental, entities as mere “shadows.” We do refer to objects, including automobiles, and we have evolved so as to be able to do that.²⁷

One may ask, “what is the externalist picture here?” Externalists can refer to things, but I do not think that reference conditions depend on any kind of descriptive theory. The concept of “reference” is a primitive unnaturalized function that refers to the external world. The “state of affairs” that make the sentence true can be determined by a “truth condition” that is also “assigned” by speakers’ meanings and context of uses but is not grasped by mere description.²⁸

For Putnam, the “state of affairs” (which Wittgenstein mentions as an external affair) are not “mental entities” or “linguistic entities” that can be understood as a sentence. Moreover, the “truth-evaluable content” cannot be considered as meanings, propositions or shadows in any sense. And, for Putnam, the phrase

²⁷ I am extremely grateful to Hilary Putnam for this valuable note that he once shared with me in a personal correspondence.

²⁸ To refute the traditional theory of meaning like Putnam I strongly believe that the truth condition of a sentence rest on the reference of the terms that is used in the sentence in a particular context or occasion through the abilities (biological and linguistic capabilities together) of the competent speakers. For further discussion of the issues, see Chakraborty, *The Labyrinth of Mind and World*.

“state of affairs” generates complexity, as he does not take “state of affairs” to stand for mental entities or meanings. Putnam refutes any description as a “state of affairs.” We can take an example here; the noun “bird” can be described in different linguistic ways, but that does not show that the noun itself is bird. The point is that it can have different interpretations based on context sensitivity. Putnam suggests that we describe “truth-evaluable content” as describing the “state of affairs” that would make the speaker’s utterance true on the relevant occasion.

However, one can also consider the “meaning” as an object. This means that the conception of ambiguity cannot be sited here. It looks true that some words may be ambiguous. The “truth-evaluable contents” of a sentence depend on a range of distinctive conditions of the sentence. Putnam convinced me that “truth-evaluable contents” are determined by “meaning plus context of use.” In fact, the notion of “truth-evaluable content” that I label as “truth conditions” depends on the process of “knowing how,” an ability that is correlated with speakers’ competence and linguistic words. Meaning can be regarded as the usual linguistic sense, which is determined in terms of linguistic uses (akin to occasion sensitivity) and comprehension (sometimes it may be the conventional grasp of understanding). The difference between Putnam and me is that according to Putnam, context sensitivity is assigned with the “truth-evaluable content” and not with the meaning, but I think context sensitivity partly also depends on the meaning. I shall discuss the reason why I think that the meaning is partly context sensitive later.

Let us see what we generally think about terms. Putnam does not believe that every term is occasion sensitive. Logical words cannot be occasion sensitive, such as the essential indexical terms, as these fail to designate anything in the external world. This is undoubtedly an externalist appeal. The example that Putnam frequently offers to clarify “context sensitivity” is, “There is milk in the refrigerator.”

Following Putnam’s argument, the “first context” would be as follows:

There may be no container of milk in the refrigerator now, but there may be a spill of a little milk in the refrigerator that needs to be wiped. In this sense, the sentence comes true.

The “second context” is that in which one of my family members asks me whether we have any milk to drink in the refrigerator or not. Somehow, I have forgotten that we are out of milk and reply: “There is milk in the refrigerator.” Now, I am mistaken and the sentence that I said in response, is false. Even if there is a little spilled milk in the refrigerator, this does not count as milk in this context. Putnam

says that the meaning cannot be regarded as context sensitive but that truth conditions are context sensitive and are determined by the meaning plus context.

You might try saying that, context sensitive truth conditions are endorsed in terms of the “reference” of the constituent terms of a sentence. Therefore, changeability of the reference in relation to context sensitivity makes “truth-evaluable contents” more context sensitive. Let us take a sentence: “there is cheese on the table.” Here, “cheese” may refer only to “some edible cheese” or “some moldy cheese” or “a few grams of dehydrated cheese” etc. that has a different reference in a different sentence. Here, “common sense and the general intelligence” of a speaker can determine or understand the exact reference of the word like “cheese” in a particular context sensitive sentence. Our understanding does not have any propositionally rigid structures, but they have syntactic structures that are verified by different occasions. Therefore, the content of our thought not only depends on reference, but is also involved with reference imposed by context sensitivity. Putnam considers that the synthetic structure of a sentence like “There is milk in the refrigerator” cannot be context sensitive, as it remains the same in both the contexts. Even the two uses of milk do not illustrate a differentiation of “meaning” or in short, the different senses in any lexicon. Here, the charge of “ambiguity” is a misleading effort to put context sensitivity in the artificial box of “ambiguity.” We can consider a term like “bank” as an ambiguous term as it is quite unclear if it means the bank of a river or a bank where people deposit their money. “Bank” has two different conventional linguistic senses that milk does not have. Putnam writes, “Note that the contextual variability of truth value is explained by the context sensitivity of the reference of individual words and phrases. That – reference of words in contexts – is what isn’t fixed by rigid rules. The connection with externalism is that both context sensitivity and externalism attack the descriptivist picture.”²⁹

However, I am not satisfied with Putnam’s argument. This account underlines a strategic weakness. My point can be put as follows: “How far would it be justifiable to claim that truth is ‘context sensitive’ in a sentence?” It seems to me that if truth takes a pertinent position in the context of meaning and their uses, then the changing of truth value can consequently result in a change in meaning. Here, the question will be “how could the ‘sameness of meaning’ be possible within our communication process?”

Putnam maintains a promising ploy in his previous example, “There is milk in the refrigerator,” and the sentence is broadly consistent with his proclamation as it does not have diverse meanings in the mentioned two contexts. So, there is

²⁹ I am thankful to Hilary Putnam for his thought-provoking analysis.

no question about its two meanings or, in my words, the changing of truth value is not the product of a change of meaning. Putnam espouses that here we will not find any change in the meaning of the term (“milk”) that is directed by the “stereotypes” and the semantic markers in the mentioned two contexts. The changeability of reference in terms of context sensitivity makes “truth-evaluable contents” more occasion sensitive. Sameness of meaning could be possible due to the fixation of the speaker’s meaning that copes with the “normal form of description” of the sentences that helps a speaker use the term meaningfully in linguistic communication.

The point, I think, is that Putnam introduced the idea of “truth-evaluable content” first, but the distinction as depicted by Charles Travis in relation to *the meaning of a sentence in language* and *what a speaker says by uttering the sentence on a particular occasion* is the source of Putnam’s attention to “truth-evaluable content.”³⁰ Travis and Putnam are in accord regarding the ingenious aspect of “truth-evaluable content” that does not rely on the linguistic meaning. Both of them believe in “truth-evaluable content” of speaker’s meaning only, which seems beyond the meaning of the referred terms. Travis’s point is that the meaning has no role to play in the case where a word comes out true. The meaning of a word imposes a condition (definite) on its truth. Travis, unwilling to accept understanding as an extract content that remains outside of circumstances as circumstances do not have any relevance to determining the required conditions of truth. The description that one has given compared to understanding words are fixed by the “circumstances.” Travis inclines to give importance to a conception of ‘understanding’ that is bound by sensitivity, and writes, “Understanding requires sensitivity. Understanding word consists, in part, sensitivity to how they fit with the circumstances of their speaking. Part of that is sensitivity to how they need to fit in order to be true. So adequate sensitivity requires grasping what truth is, and how that notion applies in particular cases.”³¹ These arguments consist of some interesting traction. We can point up that the notion of understanding does not have any propositionally rigid structure, but only syntactic structure that is verified by different occasions. Therefore, the content of thought is not only relying on the reference but on the sense that is tangled to the reference enacted by context sensitivity. The description of word that sounds occasion sensitivity also correlates with the truth that depends on the truth and

30 Charles Travis, *The Uses of Sense: Wittgenstein’s Philosophy of Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) and *Unshadowed Thought: Representation in Thought and Language* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

31 Charles Travis, “Meaning’s Role in Truth” (1996), reprinted in *Occasion-Sensitivity: Selected Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 102.

the use of words together. In short, what determines truth conditions is nothing but word meaning as understood by a speaker in a context.

III Postscript

The semantic postulates are of no avail in cases indeterminacy. Our linguistic communication has a meaning and, here, the concept of meaningfulness might play a relevant role. Otherwise, there will be a communication gap, which actually should not come up in our discourse. I may be wrong, but still I think that to explain the meaning of a sentence we should hear the speaker's verbal behavior (utterances) and consider the surrounding circumstances (context of uses). Moreover, the knowledge of the meaning of a sentence is gradually increased in epistemic situation and speakers do not know the meaning of the whole sentence or web of beliefs at a time. In support of my point Putnam once urged,

Quine is, of course, right that there is no scientifically precise criterion for “same meaning”, but he is wrong in believing that only what is scientifically precise has cognitive value. Historical hypothesis, e.g., the hypothesis that European imperialism, and particularly the struggle to acquire and retain colonies, was a primary cause of World War I, are meaningful, true or false (I believe that one is true), and justified by evidence. Quine's extreme scientism was wrong.³²

We can follow the same approach in the context of “truth-evaluable content.” The reason is that through a description of the “state of affairs,” we can identify the “truth-evaluable content” of an utterance that does not lie within any sort of systematic description in a language. The science of linguistics can stress meanings as objects. However, the problem is that if we would like to describe all the possible “truth-evaluable contents,” we should have to describe all human nature, which no science can reasonably do.

I do not think that the speakers are bound by any *a priori* semantic rules. The productivity of language and the causal history of content are jointly involved in a shared language. However, I am afraid to seeing that for Putnam “meanings are neither individuated by truth conditions, nor enough, on their own to determine truth conditions.” How could it be possible that the endless number of possible truth conditions for the sentence “there is milk on the table” simply rely on context sensitivity rather than on the changeability of meaning of

³² My thanks go to Hilary Putnam for this note and analysis.

the sentence in our understanding? I think that there is a certain “change of meaning” that in the sentence according to the context and the users’ capability of understanding the meaning, which may be conventional. This change can inform various possible truth conditions of the sentence, but all these are reliant on a trivial sense. Here, I think Putnam needs to clarify the idea of “sentence meaning” in his philosophy from the perspective of “word meaning.” We saw that for Putnam, “truth-evaluable contents” are not meanings, propositions or shadows. For Putnam, “truth-evaluable contents” are “states of affairs” that make the speaker’s utterance true on some relevant occasions by maintaining a relation to the objective world. Putnam rebuffs the notion of content on the basis of two different assumptions that I already discussed. Putnam refutes the first assumption, according to which contents are supposed to be the meaning of a sentence. Moreover, he also rejected the second assumption according to which content can determine the truth condition of sentences in all possible worlds. I appreciate his notable attempt to erase “state of affairs” from the bondage of “mental entities.” However, I wonder about the relation between the “content” that he rejected and the idea of “states of affairs” that he accepted to describe the “truth-evaluable content.” This looks like a puzzle leading to a contradiction. I fully believe that truth conditions of meaning can alter in terms of the context in which sentences are uttered, as truth is relative to the meaning of such sentences. Putnam thinks that truth is context sensitive. There is no question concerning further relativity, as the meaning and context are fixed. However, Putnam does not agree with my understanding, as he instead believes that “utterances have truth conditions.” The change in the truth condition of the sentence, “the milk is in the refrigerator” from one content to another is not a change in the meaning but a change in the “truth-evaluable content” in the mode of asserting the sentence. It is clear that, for Putnam, “truth-evaluable content” cannot be regarded as “meaning.” Putnam argues that we give meanings (in my sense) by giving what I called ‘core facts’ in “Is Semantics Possible?” and these can be systematized and presented in a textbook; we give the ‘truth-evaluable content’ of an utterance by describing the ‘state of affairs’ that the speaker alleges to obtain in other words. There is no systematic description of ‘truth-evaluable contents’ of possible utterances in a language. Meanings are objects that can be studied by the science of linguistics. To describe all the possible ‘truth-evaluable contents’ one would have to be able to describe all of human nature, which no science can reasonably hope to do. An internalist trend (represented chiefly by Frank Jackson) claims that the context sensitivity of meaning depends on the ambiguity of words. In his paper, “Narrow Content and Representation or Twin Earth Revisited,” Jackson discusses the concept of centered world content, where the differences in the referents of our beliefs are mainly caused by the differences in the

centered as these are consistent with the sameness of the particular context.³³ Keeping Jackson's point in mind, this idea is taken to endorse a reflection on the notion of context sensitivity.

Besides, another question that I intend to mention here is the following: how could Putnam assign the truth value of a sentence, where the meaning and the context of use are covered by "shadow," understood as the "states of affairs" at an occasion sensitive condition? Putnam's speculation looks weak here. One possibility that Putnam hinted to me is that meanings do not have truth conditions. Rather, utterances have truth conditions. The change that we find in the truth conditions of a sentence like "the milk is in the refrigerator" is, nonetheless, a change from one context to another that does not entail a consequent change in meaning. Putnam argues that truth is not relative to the meaning of the uttered sentence, but rather depends on the truth-evaluable content of the utterance.

This is an intriguing point. However, I find a contradiction here that once I brought to my mentor Hilary Putnam's notice, which he highly appreciated. The argument is: If Putnam believes that 'truth-evaluable content' can be identified in terms of 'state of affairs,' we should accept, from a logical stance that 'states of affairs' are objects related to our real world. The contradiction arises because, for Putnam, contents are not objects; they are rather mental or Platonic entities that can somehow be perceived by reason. In what follows, then, it would be difficult to identify "truth-evaluable content" in terms of "states of affairs." During the last few months of his life, a moving target philosopher like Putnam was working to find out a solution to this problem. Unfortunately, however on March 13, 2016 time stopped the genius's thought.

³³ Frank Jackson, "Narrow Content and Representation – or Twin Earth Revisited," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association* 77, no. 2 (2003): 55–71.