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Two Conceptions of Semantics

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Ever since Charles W. Morris distinguished among syntax, semantics, and pragmatics, those of us who attempt to teach philosophy of language to undergraduates have agonized over the boundary between the latter two. The distinction is typically explained in terms of the concept of *use*: pragmatics is the study of the way signs or symbols are used in context, whereas semantics concerns the meaning of a symbol in abstraction from its use. But this is more of a slogan than a clarification or explanation. How are we supposed to understand the difference between semantics and pragmatics when the meaning of an expression is so closely bound to the manner in which that expression is used? An expression is used a certain way because of its meaning, and yet the expression came to have the meaning it does through usage. Each of meaning and use seems to be a direct product of the other. Wittgenstein went so far as to identify meaning of a word in a large proper class of cases with its use (*Philosophical Investigations*, §43). Many regard this identification as one of the deepest philosophical insights of the twentieth century.¹

Anguish over the semantic–pragmatic distinction has become especially acute since it emerged in the work of such writers as David Kaplan that even the *pure* semantics of some expressions—like ‘here’, ‘this’, and other indexicals—necessarily involves “indexing”, or relativizing, standard semantic attributes, like truth value, content, and designation (reference, denotation), to contexts

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¹ It is significant that Wittgenstein did not go so far in §43 as to identify the meaning of a sentence or phrase with its use.

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of use.² Some writers have mistaken this as demonstrating that semantics (at least the semantics of indexicals) includes some pragmatics, or even is wholly contained within the latter. The various roles played in semantics by a speaker's use of an expression, and also the highly systematic, rule-governed interaction between meaning and use—these have made the correct characterization of pragmatics, as distinct from semantics, into a particularly thorny problem. This difficulty, however, is no excuse for blurring the distinction. However deep and pervasive are the interconnections between meaning and use, the fundamental character of the relationship between the two has been greatly overstated by some of Wittgenstein's admirers.

Michael Dummett presents the following argument:

The meaning of a mathematical statement determines and is exhaustively determined by its *use*. The meaning of such a statement cannot be, or cannot contain as an ingredient, anything which is not manifest in the use to be made of it, lying solely in the mind of the individual who apprehends that meaning: if two individuals agree completely about the use to be made of the statement, then they agree about its meaning. The reason is that the meaning of a statement consists solely in its rôle as an instrument of communication between individuals, just as the powers of a chess-piece consist solely in its rôle in the game according to the rules. An individual cannot communicate what he cannot be observed to communicate: if one individual associated with a mathematical symbol or formula some mental content, where the association did not lie in the use he made of the symbol or formula, then he could not convey that content by means of the symbol or formula, for his audience would be unaware of the association and would have no means of becoming aware of it . . . there must be an observable difference between the behaviour or capacities of someone who is said to have [implicit knowledge constituting understanding of the language of mathematics] and someone who is said to lack it. Hence it follows, once more, that a grasp of the meaning of a mathematical statement must, in general, consist of a capacity to use that statement in a certain way, or to respond in a certain way to its use by others.³

Dummett's argument, if it is correct about mathematical statements, is equally applicable to statements made in non-mathematical language. Dummett's observation that only an observable act by a speaker can succeed in communicating, even

² D. Kaplan, 'Demonstratives', in J. Almog, J. Perry, and H. Wettstein (eds.), *Themes from Kaplan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 481–563. In unpublished material Kaplan has argued in connection with expressions like 'hello' and 'ouch' for an even broader assimilation between meaning and use.

³ M. Dummett, 'The Philosophical Basis of Intuitionistic Logic', in H. E. Rose and J. C. Shepherdson (eds.), *Logic Colloquium '73* (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1975), 5–40; repr. in Dummett, *Truth and Other Enigmas* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), 215–47.

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if correct, in no way yields the conclusion that an expression's meaning is secured by, or understood by observing, the use of the expression—whether actual or potential uses.⁴ The meanings of most sentences of natural language, in fact, *cannot* lie in their actual use. This is a simple logical consequence of the fact that at any given time, only finitely many sentences have actually been used, whereas natural language includes infinitely many meaningful sentences. And indeed, very many, probably nearly all, of the sentences that are actually used are immediately understood by both the speaker and the audience despite the fact that the sentence has not been used in their presence before, and even its potential use has not been contemplated.⁵ We typically and routinely understand sentences on hearing or reading them for the first time. (Consider, for

⁴ Though this is at least close to Dummett's conclusion, it is unclear exactly what Dummett means in speaking of the use *to be made* of a sentence. Is this the use that has actually been made of the sentence? Is it the actual (immediate) future use? Is it the union of the actual past, the actual present, and the actual future use? Is it a possible future use? Is it perhaps the *semantically correct* use, a use that accords with the literal meaning (a use by the speaker to express the content that the expression itself semantically expresses with respect to the speaker's context)? Among the various conclusions that result by substituting one of these more explicit phrases for Dummett's 'the use to be made', none follows from the observation that communication requires observation.

Dummett's view expressed elsewhere (cf. *The Logical Basis of Metaphysics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 223–5) is that the meaning of a typical sentence is determined compositionally, whereas the meaning of the ultimate sentence components is determined by past use of special sentences—the lexical meaning givers—whose meanings are themselves determined by their own actual past use, rather than compositionally. The meaning of 'fragile', for example, is supposed to be gotten by observing the use of particular "simple predications" (the meaning givers) like 'That plate is fragile'. It is difficult to reconcile this view with Dummett's argument quoted in the text, which is not restricted to the allegedly meaning-giver sentences and instead covers every mathematical sentence. The meaning of any typical mathematical sentence (e.g. ' $e^{\pi} + 1 = 0$ ', etc.) is secured and understood compositionally. For this very reason, one need not observe a use of the sentence in order to understand it. Indeed, in the absence of a prior understanding of its component expressions ('e', ' π ', '+', exponentiation, etc.), observation of a particular use of the sentence will typically leave the observer clueless as to the meaning.

Some of the considerations to be made shortly apply straightforwardly to the allegedly meaning-giver sentences. We do not understand what 'That plate is fragile' expresses in a given use simply by observing the utterance. A non-French-speaker, for example, does not observe what Pierre expresses by 'Cette assiette là est fragile' when the plate that Pierre is demonstrating remains entirely intact. Rather, we understand what is expressed (namely, that a particular plate is easily broken) in the standard way, by a kind of compositional computation on the basis of a prior understanding of each of the words.

⁵ This generalization may not extend to sentences of a purely mathematical language. Nevertheless, the manner in which such sentences are understood is essentially the same compositional-computational manner as in the case of non-mathematical language.

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example, the sequence of sentences that make up this very essay.) Even on hearing or reading a previously used sentence, we do not understand it by remembering how it was used in the past. The fact that we understand sentences independently of any previous use, and we do this routinely, is not particularly mysterious. For we have observed actual uses of the individual words that make up the sentences of novel utterances, and have also learned (presumably at least partly through observation) how these words are composed to form sentences, and also how to understand a sentence on the basis of the meanings and the mode of composition of the words themselves. Observation of use undoubtedly plays a very significant role in understanding. But the conclusion that we understand an expression only through observation of actual uses of that very expression is incorrect. We definitely do not understand the sentences that give expression to the thoughts that fill our lives on the basis of previous uses of those sentences.

The point is not merely that the meaning of a sentence or phrase is not determined by its actual past uses. It should be even more obvious that the meaning of an expression is also not determined by its actual future uses, let alone by its possible future uses. Many expressions will actually come to be used to express contents that those expressions do not presently express. And *any* expression *might* yet come to be so used. There is no backward road from future use to present meaning, much less is there a trans-modal road from possible use to actual meaning. The meaning of a sentence or phrase is in fact determined *independently* of its actual or potential use by its semantic composition, by the meanings of the words and the manner in which the words are combined to form the sentence or phrase.

Even the converse thesis that the meaning of an expression determines its use is significantly overstated. Many sentences are commonly used only to convey something other than their literal content, or would be so used if they were used at all. Such uses deviate from the meaning, but they are uses all the same. The connection between meaning and use is not a matter of historical anthropology. It is a normative matter, not merely descriptive but also prescriptive. Perhaps it may be said that the meaning of a sentence (or other type of expression) determines its *correct* use. But even this formulation requires due caution. Many sentences are sufficiently unnatural, inappropriate, insulting, offensive, or bizarre, etc., that they would essentially never be used to convey the information they literally contain. In any normal sense, it would be *incorrect* to use some sentences to assert what the sentence literally expresses. There are sentences such that to use them with their literal meaning—to assert what the

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sentence literally expresses (and not as part of a parody, or in an attempt at offensive humor, etc.)—would violate every condition on civilized human society as we know it. There is indeed a dimension of evaluation on which the use of an expression may be deemed correct if and only if the expression is used with its literal meaning. But this does not provide for an illuminating identification or assimilation of meaning with use in any philosophically significant manner (e.g. a conceptual reduction of meaning to use). For the dimension of evaluation in question is peculiarly within the realm of semantics proper: an expression is used correctly *from the point of view of pure semantics* if and only if it is used with its literal meaning. Along any genuinely distinct, non-semantic dimension of evaluation, some expressions, if they are used with their literal meaning, are counter-recommended in even a minimally civilized society, if not outright prohibited by the dictates of common human decency, i.e. they are not used correctly in the relevant non-semantic way. The publisher prefers that (leave specific examples of outlandishly offensive sentences to the reader's imagination.) The claim that meaning determines correct use is true only if it is vacuous.

The problem of correctly characterizing the semantic–pragmatic distinction remains open. It is accompanied by competing conceptions of the very enterprise known as *semantics*. Some writers conceive of semantics as concerned with what a speaker *says* or *asserts* in uttering a declarative sentence, as contrasted with what the speaker *means* or *accomplishes* by means of the utterance, and/or with how the audience interprets, or how the audience correctly interprets, the utterance (these being matters of pragmatics). I believe these distinctions are properly seen as distinctions wholly *within* pragmatics, distinctions that do not so much as touch on semantics properly so-called (except in so far as semantics provides one source, among many, for what the speaker asserts in the utterance). To conceive of semantics as concerned with speaker assertion (i.e. with what the speaker who uses the sentence thereby asserts) is not merely to blur the distinction between semantics and pragmatics. It is to *misidentify* semantics altogether, and to do so sufficiently badly that those who conceive semantics in this way, when using semantic expressions like ‘denote’, ‘content’, or ‘true’, are often fruitfully interpreted as not speaking about the notions of denotation, content, or (semantic) truth at all, but about other notions entirely, specifically various pragmatic notions.

To clarify this point, I want to distinguish here between two radically opposing conceptions of semantics. The rivalry between these conceptions has seriously exacerbated the problem of maintaining the conceptual integrity

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of the semantic–pragmatic distinction. One or the other of these competing conceptions of semantics seems to be presupposed by virtually everyone who has worked in the philosophy of language. The gulf that separates the two conceptions came forcefully before my mind while reflecting on the current debate among such writers as Keith Donnellan, Saul Kripke, Howard Wettstein, myself, and others, concerning the alleged semantic significance of Donnellan’s *referential–attributive* distinction—although numerous contemporary controversies in the philosophy of language equally illustrate the fundamental difference between the two rival ways of conceptualizing semantics. A definite description, “the *such-and-such*”, is *used referentially* for a particular object *x* if the use in question is relevantly connected to *x* in the right way—paradigmatically, the speaker has that particular object in mind and believes of the object that it uniquely answers to the description (i.e. that it is a unique *such-and-such*)—and the speaker uses the description as a name or label for that object. By contrast, a definite description is *used attributively* if no object is relevantly connected to the use and instead the speaker means something to the effect that whoever or whatever is uniquely *such-and-such* is . . . The central controversy concerns whether a referential use of a definite description results in a different semantic content from an attributive use. The *thesis of semantic significance*, which Donnellan holds, is that a referential use, unlike an attributive use, results in a proposition directly about the relevantly connected object—typically, the object that the speaker has in mind.

On the *speech-act centered conception* of semantics, semantic attributes of expressions—like a singular term’s designating an object, or a sentence’s containing or expressing a proposition—somehow reduce to, are to be understood by means of, are derived from, or at least are directly determined by, the illocutionary acts performed by speakers in using those expressions, or perhaps the illocutionary acts that would normally be performed in using those expressions. Theorists who embrace the speech-act centered conception typically ascribe semantic attributes to such things as expression tokens or utterances, or to possible utterances.

The speech-act centered conception yields a serious misconceptualization of the semantic–pragmatic distinction. That distinction is properly understood by recognizing signs or expression-types (not tokens) as genuine *symbols*. Symbols symbolize; i.e. they represent. Speakers, of course, also represent. We represent objects, we represent ways for things to be, and we represent things as being one way rather than another. We routinely do these things, and we routinely do these things by producing symbols *which also do these same sorts of things*. The symbols we use, or at least many of them, represent in the way they do by means of, or in

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accordance with, a highly systematic assignment of representations to symbols. This systematic assignment of representations is semantics. And it is aptly representable by means of inductive (recursive) definitions for concepts like *designation*, *truth*, and *content*. This is how, and why, semantics is a formal discipline employing mathematical methodologies, rather than, say, psychological methodologies or anthropological methodologies—even though the semantics of a natural language is an a posteriori discipline. However deep the influence of actual usage on the representational nature of our symbols may be, it remains that the symbols themselves (including complex symbols like sentences) have specific representations systematically assigned to them, some of these assignments being a function of context.

As we have seen, our understanding of certain complex symbols is not, as it were, on a case-by-case basis, by one-at-a-time learning and rote memory. Instead we achieve an understanding of the atomic symbols, perhaps in a case-by-case one-at-a-time way, and we learn the system through which we are enabled to work out for ourselves on a case-by-case basis exactly what any given molecular symbol represents or means. What we represent with the symbols we produce need not be the very same as what the symbols themselves represent. We are constrained by the symbols' system of representation—by their semantics—but we are not enslaved by it. Frequently, routinely in fact, what we represent by means of a symbol deviates from the symbol's semantics. Most obviously this occurs with the sentences we utter, whereby we routinely assert something beyond what the sentence itself semantically expresses. Irony, sarcasm, and figurative language may be cases in point. Even in non-figurative discourse, we routinely use sentences to assert more than they semantically express. One such phenomenon that is frequently misunderstood is instanced by the following sort of case: The words 'My daughter is 12 years old' express with respect to my present context something tantamount to my having a 12-year-old daughter (more accurately, following Russell, that someone or other is both uniquely my daughter and 12 years old), whereas in uttering those same words I thereby assert something more directly about my daughter: that *she* is 12 years old. What I assert—not merely that I have some 12-year old daughter or other but specifically that *she* (*that very girl*) is 12 years old—is not semantically expressed by my words. This is exactly the sort of phenomenon that the speech-act centered conception does not adequately characterize.⁶

⁶ The phenomenon in question lies at the heart of what David Kaplan has misnamed the *pseudo de re* in 'Demonstratives', 555–6 n. 71. Cf. my 'The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly', in A. Bezuidenhout and M. Reimer (eds.), *On Descriptions* (forthcoming).

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The principal rival to the speech-act centered conception of semantics is what I call *the expression centered conception*. According to this alternative conception, the semantic attributes of expressions are not conceptually derivative of the speech acts performed by their utterers, and are thought of instead as intrinsic to the expressions themselves, or to the expressions *as* expressions of a particular language (and as occurring in a particular context). The expression centered conception takes seriously the idea that expressions are symbols, and that, as such, they have a semantic life of their own. The expression centered conception need not deny that semantics, at least for a natural language, may be ultimately a result or product of speech acts, rather than (or more likely, in addition to) the other way around. But the expression centered conception marks a definite separation between semantics and pragmatics, allowing for at least the possibility of extreme, pervasive, and even highly systematic deviation. The speech-act centered conception is more reductionist in spirit.

The expression centered conception is the received conception of semantics in the tradition of Frege and Russell. With their emphasis on artificial or idealized languages, it is they more than anyone else who deserve credit for cultivating the expression centered conception among contemporary philosophers of language. Wittgenstein focused, in contrast, on spoken natural language in his impenetrable but seemingly penetrating diatribe against the expression centered conception. Whether or not he himself subscribed to the speech-act centered conception, he is largely responsible for the preeminence of that rival conception in contemporary philosophy of language. I fear that the speech-act centered conception may currently be the dominant conception of semantics—especially among philosophers with a propensity toward nominalism, physicalism, functionalism, anti-realism, or various other philosophically timid doctrines, and also among those who trace their scholarly lineage to Wittgenstein.

Anyone whose lineage traces to Wittgenstein can trace it a step further to Russell. Elements of both traditions are clearly manifest in Donnellan's thought on reference and related matters. Still, his commitment to the speech-act centered conception might explain Donnellan's unwavering endorsement of a particularly strong version of the semantic-significance thesis according to which a referentially used description semantically designates the speaker's intended designatum regardless of whether the description actually fits. The speech-act centered conception cannot distinguish correctly between the semantic content of a sentence with respect to a given context and the content of the assertion, or assertions (statements, utterances), normally made by a speaker in uttering the sentence in that context. If this interpretation (which is

somewhat speculative) is correct, then Donnellan conceives of *speaker reference* (i.e. a speaker designating an object through the use of an expression) as, at least implicitly, a semantic, rather than a pragmatic, notion. Furthermore, he then conceives of Russell's notion of denotation for definite descriptions as a *non-semantic* notion, since it does not concern (at least not directly) acts of speakers' reference normally performed with descriptions.⁷ This interpretation seems to be confirmed by Donnellan's subsequent discussion in 'Speaker Reference, Descriptions, and Anaphora'.⁸ There he adopts Kripke's terminology of 'speaker reference' and 'semantic reference', but he does not equate what he means by the latter with Russellian denotation, vigorously arguing instead that "semantic reference" depends on, and is determined by, speaker reference, which may be other than the Russellian denotation.⁹

It is the expression centered conception of semantics, and the general Frege–Russell tradition, that is the natural habitat of the distinction between

⁷ For present purposes, Russell's notion of *denotation* for definite descriptions may be defined by saying that a definite description [the α : φ_α] *R-denotes* (with respect to semantic parameters, such as context) the individual that uniquely satisfies its matrix φ_α (with respect to those same parameters), if there is such an individual; and otherwise, it *R-denotes* nothing. Though it may be obvious that the relation of *R*-denotation between a definite description and the object that uniquely answers to it is fundamentally a semantic relation, Russell's use of John Stuart Mill's term 'denotation' is highly misleading. As is well known, Russell regarded definite descriptions as complex quantificational phrases that have neither semantic content ("no meaning in isolation") nor semantic designation (reference). The description's relation to the object uniquely answering to it *simulates* semantic designation on his theory. Russell should have called the notion 'quasi-denotation', or even 'simulated denotation'. Cf. my 'On Designating', *Mind* (forthcoming in an issue celebrating the centennial of the original publication of 'On Denoting', ed. Stephen Neale).

⁸ In P. French, T. Uehling, and H. Wettstein (eds.), *Contemporary Perspectives in the Philosophy of Language* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), 28–44.

⁹ Donnellan sometimes appears to allow for semantic designation in the absence of speaker designation. On the one hand, he says in 'Speaker Reference, Descriptions, and Anaphora' (pp. 30, 32) that in using a definite description attributively, the speaker does not designate anything even if the description happens to be proper, in the Russellian sense. But he also seems to say (on the same p. 32, and in the same paragraph) that an attributively used description itself designates its Russellian denotation. This leads to the curious position that when a speaker uses a proper description attributively, the description designates but the speaker does not. And this does not fit well the speech-act centered conception of semantics. But coupled with Donnellan's more central position that when a description is used referentially for something *x*, both the description and the speaker designate *x* even if *x* is not the Russellian denotation, neither does this curious position exactly fit the expression centered conception—or any other conception that I can think of.

Though I am uncertain what to make of Donnellan's assertions here, I believe that a careful reading reveals that appearances are deceptive, and that Donnellan (through a carefully placed occurrence of the subjunctive 'would') deliberately avoids any commitment to the claim that an attributively used proper description has semantic designation. I may be wrong.

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speaker designation and semantic designation (as well as such other Gricean distinctions as that between speaker meaning and sentence meaning). Donnellan originally characterized the referential–attributive distinction in terms of speaker reference and denotation. It would be dangerous, however, to take Donnellan’s characterization at face value. My own view—well within the Frege–Russell tradition—is that Donnellan’s apparent cataloging of speaker reference as semantic and of Russellian denotation as non-semantic obviously gets matters exactly reversed. It is just one piece of evidence of the extent to which the speech-act centered conception presents a seriously distorted picture of what semantics is, enough so that I am tempted to say that those in the grip of that conception, when using such semantic terms as ‘designate’ and ‘express’—especially when applying such terms to such things as utterances rather than expressions—are not talking about anything semantic at all.¹⁰

Confronted with the two rival conceptions of semantics, those in the grip of the speech-act centered conception will typically protest that the distinction merely reflects a purely terminological difference, superimposed on a biased preference for one sort of theoretical investigation over another. Indeed, I have offered these arguments in favor of the expression centered conception over the speech-act centered conception in several venues, invariably invoking the response that the issue is merely terminological. This response misjudges the extent of disagreement that has been registered in numerous controversies in the philosophy of language during the past several decades. Again, the debate over the alleged semantic significance of the referential use is illustrative of the general point. Proponents of the semantic-significance thesis have not claimed merely that referential use issues in a *de re* assertion by the speaker. They have claimed furthermore that the resulting *de re* assertion reflects the semantics—the content and truth value—that the sentence uttered takes on when the description therein is given such a use. I have argued elsewhere against the semantic-significance thesis.¹¹ It is not to my present purpose to rehearse those arguments. It is sufficient here to note that the two rival conceptions of semantics differ sharply over substantive issues: the question of the designation of particular definite descriptions and the question of the truth values of particular sentences. No less significant is the current controversy concerning whether co-designative names are inter-substitutable in attributions of belief or

¹⁰ See my ‘Being of Two Minds: Belief with Doubt’, *Noûs*, 29/1 (1995), esp. 18–19 n. 27.

¹¹ See ‘Assertion and Incomplete Definite Descriptions’, *Philosophical Studies*, 42/1 (July 1982), 37–45; ‘The Pragmatic Fallacy’, *Philosophical Studies*, 63 (1991), 83–97; ‘The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly’.

other propositional attitudes. It is doubtful that those (perhaps the vast majority) who insist that such substitutions fail, on the basis of what is imparted by uttering the result of such a substitution, would be prepared to grant that, nevertheless, such substitutions preserve truth value in every admissible model in which the names co-designate. While the debate over substitution might be fueled to some extent by terminological confusion or equivocation, the two competing conceptions of semantics tend to support competing judgments concerning the truth values of certain sentences, as they do also in the semantic-significance controversy. The different choices of terminology are accompanied, at least sometimes, by different verdicts concerning the truth values of particular sentences.

The battle cry “It’s all just terminology” is the last refuge of the speech-act centered conception. To be sure, there is a legitimate enterprise of investigating and cataloging the systematic correlation of speakers’ utterances or other speech acts with, say, the propositions thereby asserted or the objects to which the speaker thereby refers. Such an enterprise raises issues and questions of a philosophical nature. What are the conditions on which a speaker makes a *de re* (or *relational*) assertion? Must the speaker, for instance, use a directly referential, logically proper name? Are these conditions systematically related to the conditions on which a speaker forms or harbors a *de re* belief? Can a speaker inadvertently refer to distinct objects in a single utterance? If so, is one of the referents the primary referent, to which all other referents are subordinate? If so, in what sense is it primary, and how is it determined which referent is the speech act’s primary referent? Can a speaker make two statements in a single utterance? Several? When a speaker makes a statement, is the proposition semantically expressed by the uttered sentence *ipso facto* at least one of the propositions asserted in the speech act? Is it the primary assertion? Can a speaker assert a proposition that he or she does not grasp or understand? Do we learn the meaning of a word from its usage even when the meaning determines an infinite extension and we have only observed a finite number of applications? If so, how do we do this? What kind of fact is it about me that I mean a particular concept with an infinite extension, rather than some other concept with a different extension, one that overlaps with the one I do mean on those applications that I have observed?

These questions and more like them cry out for exploration. Their answers may reveal deep insights into the nature of cognition and the human mind. They are notoriously difficult. Some may be intractable. They are philosophically legitimate, even important questions. They are questions in the philosophy of language, broadly construed. But they do not belong to the philosophy of

logic and semantics. They do not address, for example, whether the semantic content of a demonstrative is the object demonstrated or something more perceptual or conceptual. Their answers do not specify the logical form of a belief attribution. They do not say whether quantification into a non-extensional context is semantically coherent. They do not say whether definite descriptions are indexicals. The attempt to derive properly semantic conclusions from pragmatic observations in any simple, straightforward manner is doomed to failure. It is at best misleading and confusing to use semantic jargon when talking about utterances or speech acts—to characterize utterances using terms like ‘semantic content’ and ‘semantically express’, ‘true with respect to context’ and ‘true under an assignment of values to variables’. It is perfectly legitimate and instructive to observe that a speaker would typically assert or convey or impart p in uttering sentence S in a context c . It is at best misleading to put this observation by saying that an utterance of S in c “expresses” p . Such formulations invite a construal as an observation—immediate, straightforward, obvious—that S semantically contains p with respect to c . It is perforce wrong to suppose that the observation has any direct bearing whatsoever on the issues concerning S ’s truth value. Observing that we typically use descriptions in conveying or imparting different propositions from those Russell assigns as semantic content cannot refute Russell’s semantic theory of descriptions.¹² It only confuses the issue to formulate the observation in terms of what propositions various *utterances* “express”. Nor can the question of logical validity for a proposed inference be settled by appeal to a general willingness or readiness to draw the inference, or conversely to a general unwillingness or reluctance.¹³ For the very same reason, neither can Frege’s semantic theory of proper names be supported by observing that we have general, non-singular thoughts in mind when we use names. Here again reformulating the irrelevant observation, focusing on an utterance of a sentence using a proper name and looking for the thought thereby “expressed” (i.e. pragmatically imparted), engenders no genuine support, only confusion. Semantic issues may be obfuscated, but cannot even be addressed, let alone settled, by making non-semantic observations using a semantic-sounding formulation. Calling a sow’s ear a *silk purse* is not a way to make it so.

¹² Cf. my ‘The Pragmatic Fallacy’.

¹³ This would include substitutivity arguments in the logic of propositional attribution like $[O(\text{that } \varphi_\alpha). \alpha = \beta \therefore O(\text{that } \varphi_\beta)]$, where α and β are logically simple constants. (Let O represent ‘it is necessary’ or, more controversially, ‘Jones believes’.)